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Character Themes: Against the Matriarchs

By Erik Scott de Bie

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"For all your power, wit, and charm, you are just another male who exists for no other purpose than to feed the Spider Queen."

–Matron Mother Quenthel Baenre

Born into an existence little better than slavery, most male drow in Menzoberranzan can look forward only to death through battle, treachery, or utter consumption. They are seen by the dominant females as mere resources to be used and discarded.

Denied the favor of their cruel and capricious goddess, males must survive by currying the favor of powerful female relatives or serving influential mistresses. Some defy their lot, however, and attain personal power and status in the face of the Spider Queen's overwhelming matriarchy.

This article details four character themes, each a path by which a male drow might seek to establish himself in a world that is hostile to his very existence. He might break free of the female stranglehold on drow society and join Bregan D'aerthe, Menzoberranzan's preeminent mercenary band of (mostly male) houseless drow. He might establish himself inside his family house as the elderboy, a vicious social climber who must repel attacks by his younger male relatives. He might earn respect for his martial prowess as a Melee-Magthere champion, having defeated all rivals in the Grand Melee. Or he might seek autonomy as a Sorcere adept by following the path of arcane magic that few females dare to tread.

Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary

Menzoberranzan is built on unwritten laws that provide some semblance of structure to the chaotic lives of the drow. Its harsh society does not tolerate nonconformity. Those who stand up to the matriarchy or who blaspheme against Lolth have no allies. Such drow are expelled by their houses–if they are not killed out of hand. Usually, those so exiled do not long survive, but there is a refuge for such misfits: Bregan D'aerthe. The infamous mercenary company takes in drow of all stripes: commoners who have run afoul of the priestesses, exiles, and the children of destroyed houses.

You are one such unfortunate: you were cast out of Menzoberranzan society for crimes real or perceived. When you joined, you abandoned your past, your heritage, and even your name, and you were expressly forbidden to talk about them. A sellsword, you fight for masters who in turn offer their services

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CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore," the first article in this series, from *Dragon* 399.

to the highest bidder. Bregan D'aerthe takes care of its own, though, and you can count on your new allies to protect you from past reprisals—as long as you remain useful.

As it is with the Bregan D'aerthe spy (see the *Neverwinter™ Campaign Setting*), the deadly mercenary group to which you owe your loyalty might occasionally place demands on your time or efforts. Unlike those far-roving agents, some of whom operate on the surface, you stick to more localized bloodshed. You also lack the specialization of such spies, being as likely to have a martial background as an arcane one; you might even be a cleric of a deity other than Lolth. You are a mystery: cold steel wrapped in a silken sheath.

Creating a Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary

Members of Bregan D'aerthe can be of any skill set. Anyone who proves worthy or useful is a candidate for recruitment, though most members are exiled drow. Under unusual circumstances, Bregan D'aerthe even takes in those who are not drow if they are valuable.

Most members of Bregan D'aerthe are male, and the priestesses of Menzoberranzan despise it for sheltering those who escape their power. The organization does forge alliances with female drow, however, and occasionally it takes in female members.

Starting Feature

Bregan D'aerthe mercenaries are experts in intrigue and deception. You can easily trick a foe into dropping its guard so that you and your allies can strike.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Bluff checks, and you gain the *skullduggery* power.

Skullduggery Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary Utility

You knock a foe off guard, leaving an opening for you and your allies to exploit.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Effect: The target grants combat advantage until the end of your turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Bregan D'aerthe is notorious for shifting its allegiance with the ebb and flow of coin, turning on former allies or even employers if offered a great enough reward. Bregan D'aerthe commanders use a system of signs or code words to signal such a change; some carry hidden magical whistles attuned to their followers' ears.

Uncertain Loyalties Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary Attack 5

You sow doubt in an opponent's mind as to whether you are truly a friend or foe.

Encounter ✦ Fear, Martial
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Effect: The target cannot attack you until the end of your next turn. This effect ends immediately if you attack the target.

Level 10 Feature

Bregan D'aerthe mercenaries are adept at sowing discord to turn their foes against each other. Guild veterans are masters of deception and can fake out an opponent with little effort.

Benefit: You can use the Bluff skill to feint in combat as a minor action instead of a standard action. Also, while under the effect of your *uncertain loyalties* power, a creature grants you cover and helps you flank as though it were an ally.

Optional Powers

Jarlaxle, the flamboyant master of Bregan D'aerthe, is notorious for using small magical trinkets to gain an edge. Members of the organization are also skilled in their use. Such objects are not magic items in the conventional sense and do not take up magic item slots.

Level 2 Utility Power

You have learned a minor enchantment that transforms something held in your hand into a small ring. Among other uses, this trick lets you sneak weapons past vigilant guards or steal unattended valuables.

Weapon Ring Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary Utility 2

With a flick of a finger, you produce a blade seemingly from thin air.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Transmutation
Minor Action **Melee** touch
Target: One nonliving object of 5 lb. or less that you are holding
Effect: You change the target object into a small ring on one of your fingers, or change the ring back into the object. You can have only one such ring at a time. If the ring is removed from your finger, it returns to its original form.

Level 6 Utility Power

You carry an amulet that conjures a burst of brilliant light, like a shard of the hated sun of the surface world. The sudden flash discomfits light-sensitive creatures.

Tiny Sunburst Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary Utility 6

You dazzle your foe with a bright burst of light.

Encounter ✦ Arcane
Immediate Interrupt **Close** burst 5
Trigger: A creature hits you with a melee or a ranged attack.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, the triggering creature takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls against you. If the creature has darkvision, the penalty instead applies to all the creature's attack rolls.

Level 10 Utility Power

You wear a broad-brimmed hat fashioned after that of the legendary Jarlaxle. Aside from flaunting its obvious fashion value, you can activate its magic with a tip of the hat to whisk you away from danger, teleport into the midst of foes, or bring one of them to your allies.

Dimensional Confusion Bregan D'aerthe Mercenary Utility 10

Teleportation magic sends one of your foes into your place.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Teleportation
Move Action **Ranged** 5
Target: One creature of your size or smaller
Effect: You and the target each teleport up to 5 squares, swapping positions. If the target is an enemy, it grants combat advantage until the end of your turn.

Elderboy

Some drow males rebel overtly against their subservient roles, while others find subtler means to confound the expectations of an order that seeks to grind them down. Elderboys embody such contradiction: males who are favored within their houses. They play by the matriarchy's rules—at least when others are looking.

Your birth was the first time you disappointed your matron mother, and since then your life only went downhill. You learned from an early age that you are inferior in every way. Paradoxically, what you also learned—and the reason you still live—is how to derive power by apparently submitting.

Perhaps you had the good fortune to be born the first male child of your matron mother, or a series of unfortunate occurrences claimed your older brothers. You might even have been the third son, born to be sacrificed to Lolth, but one of your brothers perished first, incidentally raising your status. You quickly climbed to the vaunted position of elderboy, the matron's oldest living son, earning something like honor within your house.

Your actions reflect not only on you but on your house, and it is your responsibility to rise above your mother's limited expectations. Your station is the envy of the other males, and you must defend yourself with all your treacherous wit.

Creating an Elderboy

An elderboy is, of course, a male drow. He can be of any class but is expected to master his chosen profession and thereby win respect. (His path might also depend on his house, since different drow families focus on particular areas; consult your DM.)

Most elderboys are warriors, since males pursuing a martial path are seen as the least threatening by house females. Such a privileged male with an arcane background faces added scrutiny from house females, who consider him too powerful for his own good; conversely, an elderboy of subtle skills (such as those of a rogue) faces continual challenges from younger brothers and other males who believe him to be weak.

Prerequisite: Male drow.

Starting Feature

The first skill you learned at the hands of your house was how to endure pain. Your toughness serves you well when facing the blades of rivals.

Benefit: You gain the *endure torment* power.

Endure Torment Elderboy Utility

You brace yourself for a particularly wicked blow, allowing you to shrug off pain for a time.

Encounter
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: You take damage from an attack.
Effect: You reduce the damage of the triggering attack by 5 + your level. After the attack is resolved, you gain resist 5 to all damage until the start of your next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

After years of exposure, you have developed a natural resistance to all poisons—the weapon of choice of your sisters and of would-be assassins.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to saving throws against ongoing poison damage, and you gain poison resistance equal to 5 + one-half your level.

Level 10 Feature

As the house elderboy, you are quick to react to danger and well accustomed to being caught in the attacks of your supposed friends.

Benefit: You gain a +1 power bonus to initiative checks and a +2 power bonus to all defenses against allies' attacks.

Optional Powers

In a society that is inimical to their existence, elderboys must learn how to get their way while seeming to stay in their place.

Level 2 Utility Power

An elderboy is constantly blamed for the mistakes of his relatives. You have grown adept at deflecting a foe's wrath.

Shift Blame Elderboy Utility 2

With quick reason and honeyed words, you turn your enemy's attack against another target.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Immediate Interrupt **Close** burst 2
Trigger: You are hit by a melee or a ranged attack.
Effect: The attack instead targets one ally in the burst within range of the attack.

Level 6 Utility Power

Even an elderboy's friends are not immune to his machinations. You are particularly skilled at endangering your allies to give yourself an edge.

Betray Confidence Elderboy Utility 6

You leave an ally in harm's way so that you can find an opening.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Target: One ally in the burst
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, the target gains vulnerable 2 all, and you gain a +2 power bonus to attack rolls.

Level 10 Utility Power

An elderboy who has reached a position of authority in his house has earned something practically unheard of for a male drow: the favor of Lolth. The fickle Spider Queen can only admire one who causes such chaos. Pray to her, and she might give you the edge you need.

Beg Lolth's Favor Elderboy Utility 10

You turn to the Spider Queen in a time of need, and she unexpectedly answers your prayer.

Daily ✦ Divine
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Effect: Choose one of the following:
Martial Favor: Until the end of your next turn, enemies in the burst grant combat advantage and take a –4 penalty to attack rolls.
Healing Favor (Healing): You and one ally in the burst can spend a healing surge.
Divine Favor: You and each ally in the burst gain a +4 power bonus to damage rolls until the end of your next turn.

Melee-Magthere Champion

You are a warrior born and bred. The pounding of blood in your veins, the thrill of battle, the knife edge between life and death—all these things are precious to you. You call yourself a champion; though the title might weigh heavy at the beginning

of your career, your chosen destiny is to seize that honor. You will not rest until you are the undisputed master of warfare as only drow can conduct it: with skill, flair, and deceit.

You chose a martial path to escape from your lowly birth, hoping to follow a road to higher station and greater power. Your training has toughened you against the rigors of drow society and, as your career progresses, you demand respect at the edge of your blades. You have performed well in the Grand Melee—a test of strategy, cunning, and skill—besting most if not all your rivals. You long for the day when you will triumph over all the other students.

At the academy, you also found a kind of nobility you had never encountered in your youth. Grace and beauty live in battle and in the wary camaraderie that warriors develop. In the company of other males, your gender meant little; you were allowed a certain degree of self-determination. Your skills have even earned something like respect from the few female students and instructors at Melee-Magthere.

What will you do after leaving the school? You owe your training to the orders of your odious matron mother, but you feel no sense of loyalty to her. Just as your house uses you to earn esteem—hoping to boast of an infamous warrior or weapon master—so should you in turn exploit that relationship to earn glory and advance your own ends.

Creating a Melee-Magthere Champion

Melee-Magthere is the school of Tier Breche devoted to martial pursuits, so the skills it teaches are most appropriate to a martial defender or striker. All noble drow are expected to take instruction at Melee-Magthere, regardless of their inclinations, but most of those who excel are warriors or rogues.

Although most long-time students of Melee-Magthere are male, some female drow also prove skilled and worthy of glory. Such a career is considered beneath females, but those who lack arcane aptitude or the favor of Lolth have little choice.

Prerequisites: Drow, any martial class or defender role.

Starting Feature

Your training at Melee-Magthere has taught you to expect treachery in battle. Indeed, an opponent who fights fair makes you anticipate the hidden knife all the more. You respond to any threat with calculated grace.

Benefit: You gain the *lurking spider* power.

Lurking Spider Melee-Magthere Champion Utility

Your unexpected counter knocks your foe off balance.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: A creature within your reach hits you with an attack.
Effect: The triggering creature is slowed until the end of its next turn, and you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses until the end of your next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Your training has taught you to fight with the viciousness of a spider. When you see an opening, you do not hesitate to strike, leaving a crippling wound that stops your prey from escaping.

Benefit: When you hit any enemy with an opportunity attack, that enemy is slowed until the end of its turn.

Level 10 Feature

When you fight defensively, you lurk within a web of steel, inviting a strike. A foe that falls for your trap cannot escape your wrath.

Benefit: When you use your *lurking spider* power, you can use a free action to make a melee basic attack against the triggering creature as part of the power.

Optional Powers

Melee-Magthere champions learn a variety of tricks and techniques based on the deadly dance of Lolth's favored children.

Level 2 Utility Power

The blade spider waits until it can strike with impunity, then pounces to rend the victim's flesh. You have learned how to read an opponent to learn the best time to strike, delivering a blow that leaves your foe open.

Blade Spider's Lunge Melee-Magthere Champion Utility 2

Your deadly strikes leave your foes reeling.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the blade spider's lunge stance. Until the stance ends, any creature you hit grants combat advantage to the next creature that attacks it before the end of your next turn.

Level 6 Utility Power

You know that quick footwork is key to surviving a battle, and clever positioning is more important than brute strength. To this end, you have perfected the dance of the phase spider, moving so fast in response to a foe's tactics that you seem to teleport. You can turn an enemy's shove into a tumble to improve your position.

Dance of the Phase Spider Melee-Magthere Champion Utility 6

You fight in constant motion, always on the move around a foe and rolling with blows.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the dance of the phase spider stance. Until the stance ends, when an adjacent enemy shifts, you can shift 1 square as an immediate reaction. In addition, whenever you are subjected to forced movement, you can shift up to 2 squares as a free action after the forced movement is resolved.

Level 10 Utility Power

Over years of training, you have learned much of inflicting and enduring pain. You have mastered a strike that mimics the venom of one of Lolth's tiny but deadly children—the black widow.

Black Widow's Bite Melee-Magthere Champion Utility 10

You strike a particular pressure point with a well-aimed blow, twisting your foe with agony.

Daily ✦ Martial
No Action **Melee 1**
Trigger: You hit an enemy with a melee attack.
Effect: That enemy is also immobilized and takes ongoing 10 damage (save ends both).

Sorcere Adept

Sorcere represents the most powerful bastion of male power in Menzoberranzan. Although the school owes ostensible fealty to the Mistress of Arach-Tinilith, Sorcere offers its pupils the chance to study as they wish, with only lax oversight from the matriarchs of drow society.

Your enrollment in Sorcere was a great relief after having lived with the cruel oppression of your matron mother and sisters. Here you could pursue your interests while paying only lip service to Lolth and her minions. You bow and scrape but hide a smile behind your hand, because one day you might use the powers you gain at Sorcere for a direct assault against the matriarchy.

Until then, you exploit your limited autonomy to quietly increase your personal power. You care little for social machinations and the small-minded pursuit of face, though you are not stupid enough to ignore such games. You are drow, after all, and Sorcere has plenty of intrigues of its own.

Creating a Sorcere Adept

Most noble drow spend some time studying at Sorcere, but those who excel are usually male wizards, sorcerers, and warlocks.

Female drow usually take basic studies at Sorcere before moving on to the more socially acceptable service of Lolth. A few females' talents run more to arcane magic than the divine, however.

Prerequisites: Drow, any arcane class.

Starting Feature

Some of Sorcere's most powerful spellwork involves sacrifice: a small amount of blood to power your dark magic. Your own will do in a pinch, but you prefer an offering from an ally or a helpless enemy.

Benefit: You gain the *blood empowerment* power.

Blood Empowerment Sorcere Adept Attack

Through sacrifice, you strengthen your magic.

Encounter ✦ Arcane
Minor Action **Close** burst 1
Target: You or one willing, stunned, or helpless creature in the burst
Effect: The target takes damage equal to your level. You can roll twice and use the higher result on one attack roll you make this turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

You are among the most adept scholars of Sorcere, and the arcane realm keeps few secrets from you.

Benefit: You gain the Ritual Caster feat. If you already have this feat, you can instead add two rituals of your level or lower to your ritual book at no cost.

Level 10 Feature

Your long years of study have taught you much about the Underdark, and you can requisition supplies from Sorcere for your ongoing research.

Benefit: You can use your Intelligence modifier instead of your Wisdom modifier for Dungeoneering checks. In addition, once per day, you can perform an Arcana or Dungeoneering ritual of 10th level or lower without paying the component cost.

Optional Powers

Sorcere adepts often summon lesser demons and bind them into servitude, whether for protection or attack.

Level 2 Utility Power

You have delved into the secret elemental nature of demons. You fear no fire, frost, or other element now that you have bound a demon to protect you.

Demonic Ward — Sorcere Adept Utility 2

You call upon dark pacts you have made with demons to protect you from your foe's elemental strikes.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Elemental
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: You take acid, cold, fire, or lightning damage.
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you gain resistance to one of the triggering damage types equal to 5 + one-half your level.

Level 5 Attack Power

Demons revel in torment and destruction, and you have harnessed that potential for your own magic.

Shiver Flesh — Sorcere Adept Attack 5

Your vile magic is anathema to living flesh.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Implement, Necrotic
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence or Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + Intelligence or Charisma modifier necrotic damage, and the target is dazed and takes ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends both).
Miss: Half damage, and the target is slowed (save ends).

Level 9 Attack Power

Your mastery of demon-tainted magic allows you to change the very substance of your foes. You can transform their flesh into fragile glass, making them vulnerable to follow-up attacks.

Glasstrike — Sorcere Adept Attack 9

As your spell takes hold, your foe's limbs freeze up and its body becomes a statue of black glass.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Implement
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence or Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: The target is petrified (save ends).
First Failed Saving Throw: The target is petrified and loses all resistance to damage (save ends both).
Aftereffect: The target is slowed (save ends).
Miss: The target is immobilized (save ends).
Aftereffect: The target is slowed (save ends).

About the Author

Erik Scott de Bie is an author and designer whose recent credit include the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* and his fourth Forgotten Realms® novel, *Shadowbane*. When not writing or designing, he spends his time sharpening his swords, volunteering with a local animal rescue, and thinking about writing or designing.

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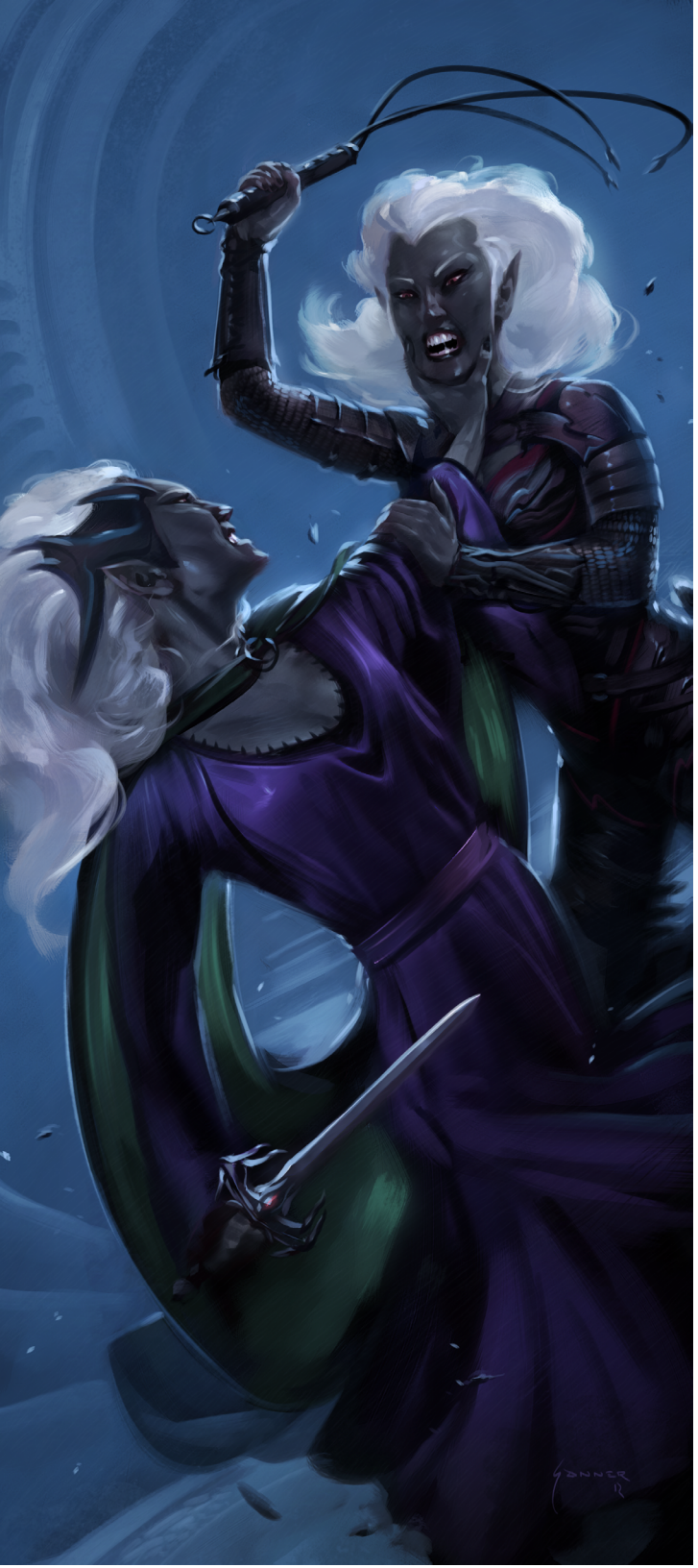

Character Themes:
Scourges of Lolth

By Erik Scott de Bie

Illustration by Kieran Yanner

"Serve Lolth, and in so doing, earn her favor. To the drow, there must be nothing else."
—Minolin Fey-Branche, Mistress of Arach-Tinilith

The word of Lolth is law to the drow, and she speaks through her priestesses. Female drow scheme, betray, and murder their way to power, and the most certain route to gain control over others is through service to the Spider Queen. All are expected to honor Lolth, but only those priestesses who publicly gain her favor can rise above their political rivals in Menzoberranzan.

A drow priestess advances only when her superior is removed—most often by death, though treachery can take other forms. Lesser acolytes constantly vie to supplant those above them. The demands of church and house often conflict, forcing priestesses to split their loyalties. Their own advancement comes first, but lasting success comes to those who best turn Lolth's worship to their benefit.

This article details two character themes you can use when playing a member of Lolth's clergy. As a house priestess, you opt to support your matron mother—at least until you can take her place. A widow of Arach-Tinilith avoids house infighting to serve Lolth in a more direct capacity, counting on divine favor to guide her path.

House Priestess

Drow society thrives on infighting, treachery, and ruthless ambition, and nowhere is this more apparent than among the priestesses of the Spider Queen. Lolth demands that the strong survive to rule the weak, and every drow house follows this most sacred of commandments. If you fall to a rival's machinations, then you did not deserve your position in the first place.

You were born to rule. As the daughter of a matron mother, you claimed the divine power of Lolth as your birthright, and with it you mean to advance your station and secure your destiny. You spent fifty years

CHARACTER THEMES

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For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore," the first article in this series, from *Dragon* 399.

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in training at Arach-Tinilith, but the endless cycle of ritual was not for you. You prefer the chaotic arena of your own house, battling your sisters for dominance. You excel at betrayal and don't hesitate to turn against enemies and allies alike.

One day, you will succeed your matron mother—most likely by the edge of a sacrificial blade. Until then, you lurk and scheme, weaving a web of intrigue.

Creating a House Priestess

A house priestess treats her station as a political office foremost; she might be devoted to Lolth, but that fact is independent of her status. She is always a female drow and is usually noble. Perhaps she is a daughter of the matron mother, an adoptee from another house, or a promoted commoner. Noble drow daughters who hope to advance within the house hierarchy must demonstrate some level of divine talent, even if they are more warrior, wizard, or rogue than cleric.

Prerequisite: Female, drow, any divine class.

Starting Feature

You are a master of treachery, and those who turn their backs to you do so at their peril.

Benefit: You gain the *devious strike* power.

Devious Strike House Priestess Attack

The Spider Queen blesses your stealthy attack.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You hit a creature granting combat advantage to you.
Effect: Your attack deals 5 extra damage, and you gain a +2 power bonus to attack rolls and skill checks until the end of your next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Your actions have earned notoriety for your house, and your authority is recognized wherever you go.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Diplomacy checks and Intimidate checks.

Level 10 Feature

As a priestess of Lolth, you are practically untouchable. Those lower in status are loath to do you harm, for fear of crossing not only your house but also the will of Lolth.

Benefit: While you are not bloodied, minions and bloodied enemies take a -2 penalty to attack rolls against you. This is a fear effect.

Optional Powers

As a house priestess, you command obedience, backed by Lolth's will. You can add the following powers to those available to you at the stated levels.

Level 2 Utility Power

The status you have attained in your house gets you what you want. Lesser drow—particularly mere males—would be foolish to deny the wishes of one destined to be matron mother.

Obey Your Betters House Priestess Utility 2

You issue a command, enforced with an undisguised threat of painful death.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make a Diplomacy check or an Intimidate check and dislike the result.
Effect: You reroll the check with a +4 bonus, and you can use either result.

Level 6 Utility Power

Your station grants you certain protections. To attack you is to invite the wrath of your house.

Promise of Regret House Priestess Utility 6

You vow swift vengeance to the fool who dared strike you.

Encounter
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy hits you with an attack.
Effect: Until the end of the triggering enemy's next turn, you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses against that enemy's attacks, and each of your attacks against that enemy can score a critical hit on a roll of 19-20.

Level 10 Utility Power

You have advanced so far in Lolth's service that, with a prayer, you can temporarily deny the goddess's favor to a rival. Indeed, your influence in the church is so strong that you can curse the faithless and servants of other deities as well.

Deny Favor House Priestess Utility 10

As your foe strikes, you beseech Lolth to repay the insult with her divine curse.

Daily ✦ Divine, Fear
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 10
Trigger: An enemy hits you with an attack.
Effect: Until the end of its next turn, the triggering enemy takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls, grants combat advantage, cannot regain hit points, and cannot recharge powers.

Widow of Arach-Tinilith

Lolth governs all aspects of drow life, teaching the art of destruction and the beauty of chaos. All things feed the insatiable hunger of the Spider Queen, but she best rewards those servants who deliver the tastiest sweetmeats of misery and darkness. Such worshipers eschew the decadence of drow society in favor of the simpler, harsher ways of the spider. They retreat to the halls of Arach-Tinilith, swearing themselves entirely to Lolth in a dark sisterhood.

From the time you were born, the Spider Queen held you in special favor, granting you great facility with divine magic. Perhaps she foresaw in you remarkable strength, wickedness, or cunning. Whatever the reason, Lolth marked your birth by sending a demonic spider to your side, and it has been your constant companion ever since. You share a natural hunger to feast upon those weaker than yourselves.

As a girl, you found refuge within Arach-Tinilith, away from the petty scheming and political ambitions of your sisters. In its comforting embrace, you devoted all your time to serving the Spider Queen in the best way you knew. After many decades of study, you have come to understand the depths of Lolth's chaotic hedonism in a way few others can, and you are confident in your superiority.

Now that you clearly see the underpinnings of drow society, you know that Menzoberranzan stands upon a fragile precipice. You endeavor to serve—and feed—the Spider Queen, but you must maintain the balance of treachery lest the city fall, to the detriment of the goddess and her worshipers. You have sworn to defend your home against threats from within and without.

Creating a Widow of Arach-Tinilith

A widow of Arach-Tinilith must be a female drow sworn to Lolth. Her service to the goddess comes before anything else, and the day-to-day political maneuvering of Menzoberranzan means nothing to her. Such dedicated priestesses of the Spider Queen form a tight clique, and they are intolerant of those without divine abilities or backgrounds.

Prerequisite: Female, drow, any divine class.

Starting Feature

From a young age, you have demonstrated an affinity for spiders, forming bonds more easily with your eight-legged sisters than with your own kind.

Benefit: You gain a spiderling familiar. This familiar uses the rules for arcane familiars found in *Arcane Power*™ on page 137.

If you gain another familiar or similar companion, such as those granted by the Arcane Familiar or Elemental Companion feats, you lose the use of the spiderling familiar.

Spiderling of Lolth Familiar

Twisted and evil, Lolth's children delight in binding their prey to keep for later feasting.

Speed 4, climb 4 (spider climb)

Passive Benefits

Venom Affinity

You gain a +2 bonus to saving throws against ongoing poison damage.

Webs of Malice

Enemies take a -1 penalty to saving throws against your divine attack powers that immobilize or slow them.

Active Benefits

Minor Action ✦ At-Will

As a minor action, a spiderling can slide a creature that is taking ongoing poison damage and within 5 squares of the familiar 1 square.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

The presence of Lolth's children comforts and strengthens you. Also, constant exposure to your spider companion has inured you to poisons.

Benefit: You gain resistance to poison equal to 5 + one-half your level. In addition, you gain a +1 bonus to all defenses while you are within 10 squares of a spider ally, or while your spiderling familiar is in its active mode.

Level 10 Feature

The Demon Queen of Spiders has favored you with her venom, which runs through your soul like blood in your veins. All who doubt the power of Lolth shall feel the Lady's kiss.

Benefit: You can choose to deal poison damage with your divine attack powers instead of their normal damage type.

Optional Powers

Arach-Tinilith has taught you powerful prayers that allow you to draw upon the favor of your goddess. You can add the following powers to those available to you at the stated levels.

Level 2 Utility Power

Like Lolth's demonic spiders, you savor your prey's fear and pain as you feast on its blood, whether given willingly or not.

Blood for Spiders Widow of Arach-Tinilith Utility 2

You accept a blood sacrifice from an ally.

Encounter ✦ Divine
Minor Action **Melee** 1
Target: One ally adjacent to you or your spiderling familiar

Effect: The target loses a healing surge, and you gain temporary hit points equal to the target's healing surge value. If the target has no healing surges, the target instead takes damage equal to his or her surge value, and you gain the temporary hit points.

Level 6 Utility Power

Lolth enwraps you in the aspect of her majestic form, so that not even the bravest of foes can strike you.

Demonweb Visage Widow of Arach-Tinilith Utility 6

Lolth's wrath shapes your body momentarily into that of a spiderlike demon, and your enemies lose heart.

Daily ✦ Divine, Fear, Illusion
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the start of your next turn, enemies cannot attack you or your spiderling familiar.

Level 10 Utility Power

You walk in the favor of the Spider Queen, a fact that is evident to all around you. When pressed, you invoke her blessing to take the tentacled form of a yochlol, one of Lolth's most favored demonic servants.

Yochlol Form Widow of Arach-Tinilith Utility 10

You call upon Lolth to grant you the yellow, gelatinous form of her handmaidens.

Daily ✦ Divine, Polymorph
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the form of a Medium yochlol until the end of the encounter. In this form, you gain a +2 power bonus to Will and your melee reach increases by 1. Until the end of the encounter, you can use a minor action to change between your normal form and your yochlol form.

About the Author

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Driders on the Storm

Written and illustrated by Jared von Hindman

Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to talk about the Underdark. Light your torch, kiss your innkeeper goodbye, and watch your head as we descend.

Not to be confused with the Uberdark, this domain of the Dungeons & Dragons® game has been in the game longer than many of us have been alive and is not going anywhere anytime soon. The geography of this subterranean world might fluctuate as the ground shakes and plates shift, but the experience is relatively unchanged over the years—admittedly for a given value of "relative," but you know what I mean. As tempting as it might be to illustrate the danger of this domain by citing the drow's annual "Running of the Ghouls" in Erelhei-Cinlu or the confusion of the UnderWild and the UnderFell (known to their inhabitants as the Feydark and the Shadowdark), I'll do my best to keep this handy guide to dire spelunking from delving too much into the lore. Narrative trivia won't keep you alive as your campaign to clean out the world's basement unfolds. More useful might be the wizard pro tip, "Always wear a safety harness," or this ancient kobold haiku on recognizing rock formations:

That's a stalactite
or a stalagmite. (Who cares?)
Pray it has no mouth.

With that ominous poetry in mind, let's start packing for your adventure in the largest sewer level of any game around.

Disclaimer: We're going to assume that you're already familiar with the mundane items required for this expedition. Of course, the definition of the word "mundane" varies greatly, so for those playing along at home, I recommend an adventurer's kit, a slew of 11-foot poles (trapmakers know standard measurements, too, so better safe than sorry), plenty of toilet paper, rain sticks (from *Heroes of the Feywild*™), a crate of chickens (known commonly as "trapfinders"), and a shovel. These are just guidelines, and I readily admit that not everyone is willing to pack a shovel. Let's begin!

The Antidepressant of the Spider Queen

Don't forget to bring antidepressants when heading into the Underdark. The Underdark's ability to drive people crazy is almost supernatural in scope. (Okay, fine, it *is* supernatural in scope.) Think of every terrible haunted house you visited when you were a kid. Poor lighting, people bigger than you lurking ahead, spooky noises, and what I like to call the "coward's shuffle," which is the state of affairs when no one wants to be first but no one wants to linger, either, so everyone pushes someone else ahead of them, like a sacrifice to whatever dark god in a rubber mask is waiting around the corner.

Keeping one's sanity is paramount in the Underdark, and however you achieve this goal, it will be your salvation in the long game. Painting a happy skyline on the cave wall next to your bed whenever

you rest for the what-you-think-might-be-night-but-it's-impossible-to-tell works for some people. Others, such as Drizzt Do'Urden, have become famous for their ability to keep their diary and LiveJournal up to date while exploring this treacherous world. Many

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alchemists offer easy-to-quaff bottles of Zololth, which is both an antidepressant and an antitoxin, letting proud adventurers prepare themselves without ever having to admit to thoughts of despair.

The threat of pulling an Artax (also known as "letting yourself be swallowed by sadness" by those who have not seen the movie *The NeverEnding Story*, which, despite the title, is only 102 minutes long) is not from isolation. In fact, it's quite the opposite. If there are any reasons not to trust your companions completely, they will come to light in the pressure cooker that is the Underdark. Is the warlock leading you in circles? The cleric . . . is there really such a thing as a "good" drow? How about that vampire pixie werewolf? You didn't trust her from the moment she joined the group. And that dwarf? He's going to outlive the entire party—you can see it in his beady eyes, can't you?

When confronted by these feelings, take a deep breath, and have the party try a few trust fall exercises. Let the dragonborn catch you, and show him that you're willing to do the same. You might laugh, but so might the dark creeper that's been sneaking up on you this whole time, giving away the creeper's position. So you see, a happy party is a living party.

In a similar vein, tracking the passage of time gets more difficult as you delve into deeper and deeper caverns, so feel free to surprise members of your troupe with an extra birthday or two. It's not like they can confirm the date, and who doesn't want cake? Wait . . . did you pack a cake? Maybe you should. Nothing causes a soiree to backfire quite like a cake made out of fungus and sweetened oozes.

The Divine Power Vacuum

Divine characters seem to suffer more than most others when trapped in the Underdark for long periods of time, since many of them assume that the gods can't see what's going on and their prayers are incurring huge roaming fees. Actually, this statement is about as silly as saying the pantheon is actually sitting on a cloud looking down at mortals. The real issue here is that Underdark natives have no real use for many of the deities that get the most play in Waterdeep. Let's take a look at a handful of gods, and you'll see what I mean.

Corellon: god of beauty, magic, art, eladrin, and spring

Melora: goddess of the wilderness and the sea

Kord: god of storms and battle

Pelor: god of agriculture, the sun, time, and summer

The Raven Queen: goddess of death and winter

Sehanine: goddess of illusions, the moon, and autumn

See the trend here? The Underdark has no seasons. It has no sky. The sun and the moon are reduced to abstract concepts. It's debatable whether creatures of the Underdark even know what a storm is in the same way that you and I might. I'll let a theologian debate the issue of Melora, whose domains might be said to come to an abrupt stop the moment someone presents her with a ceiling—and the Underdark has quite a few of those.

This problem exponentially complicates the lives of druids, because many of the tenets of their religion and class have no easy parallels. If you've read my article on the Elemental Chaos, you might remember that even that alien world has an equivalent to "normal" life. But there's a reason Lolth thrives below ground and nowhere else. The Underdark is filled with obscure gods dedicated to fungus, slime, giant moles (gnome mythology is weird), and other things that couldn't survive on the faith of the surface dwellers. Keep this in mind before heading out. It'll also prepare you for dealing with local priests and cultures. It's not their fault that they need your brain for tonight's ritual; it's just that the Underdark lacks high-quality divine role models.

Consider how you would make a typical drow understand the concept of weather, the moon, or the sun (let alone the idea of gender equality, but that's a deck of many other things). Worse, mind flayers have a healthy cultural foothold here underground, and they've been poisoning the locals' minds with their twisted image of the cosmos and tales of their fallen intergalactic empire. It makes sense that the Far Realm and its iconic freakiness is trendy in the Underdark.

Back on topic: Stock up on prayers if you go in for that sort of thing. If you're a druid, be sure to leave a trail like Archon Appleseed, who sowed seeds as he explored this alien world in the fables of old. Sure, the seeds didn't grow without sunlight, but it's the thought that counts. Just don't "go native" and try getting chummy with the local flora and fauna. Unlike on the surface world, the mundane creatures of the Underdark have statistics and are pretty much there to kill you. Now, let's talk economics and Lolth.

A Web-Based Economy

It's time to explain why you need to pack as much live bait as possible before delving deep underground. The answer is: spiders. Lots and lots of spiders.

Not only is Lolth the goddess of spiders, but a lot of her servants keep them as pets, guards, mounts, guides, alarm systems, lab assistants, textile manufacturers, and more. Thematically, it's cool in a creepy way, but there's a logical problem here. How many giant insects live in the Underdark? The larger arachnids probably dine on slaves provided by their drow matrons, but what do the other species eat? It's safe to assume that live bait shops make a killing (if you'll forgive the phrase) in the Underdark. The job isn't glamorous, but something has to be keeping those spiders alive. How many times has a confrontation with drow been averted by a suspicious foreigner offering to import grasshoppers to ease the insect crisis? Just be sure not to bring along crickets—the chirping has a penalty on Stealth checks like you wouldn't believe.

An often-overlooked advantage to a world of spiders is the fact that the Underdark has no proper roads. Dwarves might rely on mining carts, but outside the mines, they can't travel too far. Arachnids, on the other hand, are the all-terrain vehicles of choice. Sure, their mileage varies and they often eat their weight in riders, but they're worth it. When you reach your first drow outpost, look into buying a used spider as a mount if your credit rating is high enough. The used spider market is probably thriving. With all the evil priestesses and schemes thwarted by adventurers, the drow have a hard time finding new homes for all those spiders, and the creatures are too holy to be put to sleep. Won't you help one of these magnificent arachnids, whose only crime was being born with a poisonous toxin and pedipalps?

Hmm . . . I think I'd better drop this train of thought. I just had a vision of what the equivalent of a dog pound would look like in drow land, and now I might not sleep for a week.

Plungeoneering

Alongside your shovel, throw a clothespin into your knapsack, and try not to think about where you'll be going to the bathroom while in the Underdark. It's an unsavory notion at best, and at worst, sentient mushrooms patrol the caverns in search of "leavings" to feed to their colony. I told you—the ecosystem down here is weird. And once your brain starts thinking about this subject, things only get worse. Are you starting to worry about the fact that there's no ventilation in the Underdark? Are drow assassins tracking you more easily because you didn't dispose of things properly? Is this why troglodyte society places such a high value on smelling as bad as possible? Considering that most denizens of the Underdark don't know what laundry is, chances are they won't know what that thing is you've got pinned to your nose.

Don't dwell too long on the laundry issue. It's best to avoid thinking about how bad you and your companions must smell when you can't take showers. (Advanced spelunkers might want to bring a few scrolls with the Fastidiousness ritual. Ten gold pieces

is a small price to pay for a magical cure to body odor, bad breath, and underarm funk.)

Perhaps you can circumvent the whole problem with a *toilet of holding*. It's a lot like a *bag of holding*, but you never, ever want to take anything out of it. Even better, if you're worried about pickpockets, hang this pouch loosely from your hip. Thieves won't steal from you more than once, and you'll catch them red-handed—or brown-handed, in this case.

Ick. I don't think I'll ever eat again. Which works in my favor, really.

The Miracle Underdiet

If you want to lose weight fast, the Underdiet might be for you. Rations eventually run out, and there are no drive-throughs to be found anywhere. Thus, you should pack a lot of seasonings (antitoxin counts as a seasoning), hot sauce, and maybe even a fondue set—anything to make sure that whatever you end up having to eat doesn't taste like what it actually is. Sure, mushrooms are a common food, but you're a special kind of vegetarian when you have to defeat your salad components in combat before you can douse them in vinaigrette. In D&D, the "militant vegetarians" are quite ghoulish, eating their slain enemies raw, but that's a tangent for another day.

A lot of delvers lose weight rapidly because most things in the Underdark are foul, poisonous, or both. Just remember to drown it in ketchup (literally, if it's still squirming) and think about the next time you get to roll initiative.

Don't Forget the Butter

I know you're thinking, "Why bring butter? When will you have the chance to grill a cheese sandwich in the Underdark?" Actually, the answer to that question might surprise you, but what we're actually talking about here is the likely event of getting stuck in a cave. There is no reliable map of the Underdark and no subterranean GPS to help you out. The dwarven solution to reaching a dead end or an incredibly shrinking tunnel involves a pickax, but sometimes you just don't have the time to start a mining operation. That's where the butter comes in.

Of course, the downside of using butter to extract yourself from a tight spot is that you become more delicious to the local inhabitants. Given that they want to eat you already, I say the butter is an acceptable risk. Many adventurers have tried a variation of this trick by using spoiled dairy products, but trust me: the ecosystem of the Underdark thrives on rotting things, and you don't want to be classified as such any earlier than necessary.

Still crave an underburger? Try your hand at hunting wild rothé. A rothé is a musk ox that's blind, hairy, smelly, and the closest thing you'll find to a cow in the Underdark. I'm told they are appropriately delicious. They do, however, raise some interesting questions beyond "How much of an animal must I shave to make it edible?"

If you want to have some narrative fun, remember that rothé are basically giant freaking cows. This fact has two troublesome implications. First, in this sparse environment, the creatures will eat everything they can before moving on. Finding areas filled with rothé droppings but no plant life is a sure sign that a herd of rothé has passed through it.

Second, methane. As subterranean cows, rothé logically produce methane . . . in small, enclosed caves. Again, I don't want to explore the obvious. Let me leave it to your imagination and advise you not to be the one using an open flame as a light source.

Speaking of deadly gas, bring a canary with you. Caves are often filled with gases (sometimes from the inside of undercows), and a canary can serve as an early warning system that alerts you when it's time to leave. Don't have a canary? Bring a halfling. The halfling's low body mass will work pretty much the same way.

Eight Hours of Sleep: The Silent Killer

Coffee and a healthy supply of Mesa Dew (or Red Bull Rush energy drink) will serve you well in the Underdark. Telling time is tricky in this subterranean land. Cities here have their own clocks, and local time varies greatly as you travel. Drow might let you know that it's "eight spires," a gnome might say it's "thirty dings," and a troglodyte might emit a smell that, if you weren't gagging, would roughly translate to "happy hour."

Time becomes more important when you need to take an extended rest. Except in settlements, there really isn't an agreed-upon night or day. If you're a cleric who recovers spells at dawn or sunset, for example, you might become a little confused. Worse, without a clock or a sunrise, it's hard to know for certain how much time passed while you slept. Still worse? The monsters don't all sleep when you do. (Drow have trance raves during most of their nights, but don't nitpick.) They're coming for you at every moment, and as soon as you hug your stuffed owlbear and tuck yourself in for the maybe-night, that's when the nasty critters strike. As a result, insomnia is a common problem among delvers of the deep, and, frankly, it can be an advantage. So brew another cup of Thayan Red Blend and finish that crossword puzzle while you wait for your eight hours to pass.

Did you know that thermal stealth suits are available in neon pink and green? Most of us are familiar with the concept of darkvision, but the Science of Older Editions teaches that not only is it in black and white, but for many creatures, such as the drow, it's thermographic. Yep—drow have the same vision as the Predators of movie fame, or at least they used to. It's unclear. And yet I'd be remiss for not pointing out that infravision has been an iconic tool of Underdark creatures for decades. So has ultravision, but the less said about using ultraviolet light to hunt undercows, the better. Just remember to be prepared, and if you

can find a clever way to exploit the color blindness of a drow or other foe, go right ahead. Color-coded messages written in Eternal Chalk are a great starting point.

The Surreal Estate Market

Although mapping the whole Underdark isn't really an option, it's still useful to explore this unique realm in a way that many folks might overlook. For example, dwarves are a subterranean race, yet no one associates them with the Underdark. That's because Underdark races are evil or creepy, right? In other words, the Underdark is not just a matter of geography.

When I was first introduced to D&D, I was a little confused about the cosmology. Click here to see what I'm talking about, but in a nutshell, I was under the impression that the Underdark was a shadow dimension that was buried beneath the ground, but you couldn't dig your way to it. True, the realm has some supernatural qualities, but if you burrow deep enough, you'll find the Wonderful World of Duergar, Drow, and Friends in your own backyard. That's terrifying but also worth exploring.

The idea of land ownership and creatures of the underground isn't anything new to fantasy. (If you're interested in the subject, I suggest reading *Thud!* by Terry Pratchett, a book about deep dwarves burrowing beneath a city illegally.) The Dungeons & Dragons game is filled with . . . well, dungeons. Labyrinths of increasing complexity and doom. Lairs of untold horrors. The landscape is littered with them, and that fact gives us more narrative options for exploring the Underdark.

Are the tombs created from above or below? Sure, ancient cultures and forgotten kingdoms have come and gone, leaving remnants of mining operations that must have been epic in scope, but what did Acererak do with all that earth he excavated to create his legendary home? If you want to have some fun, explore the idea of subterranean designers who build dungeons that are never meant to be found by surface dwellers, or, at best, provide a point of entry from below rather than from above. Why come in through the front door when tunneling up from beneath is so much easier? It's a fun reversal of the reverse dungeon. Somehow. (The release of *Into the Unknown: The Dungeon Survival Handbook*™ earlier this year gives you more toys to play with in this arena.)

In a similar vein, if you're ever trapped somewhere in Faerûn, just remember that if you dig deep enough, you'll find the Underdark. Many far-flung civilizations grow up in isolation from the rest of the world, but when you burrow down beneath them, they are all united by the Underdark. It's a fun concept to explore when storytelling. Why do all the members of a long-lost tribe speak Elven and come out only at night?

Another big question is whether the Underdark mirrors the surface world. How can you know just how many feet of earth lie between you and the uppermost of the local Underdark tunnels? When an architect surveys the land for a new temple of Pelor, does she take into account how deep the catacombs

will be allowed to extend? In five hundred years, will the temple priests remember that limit before creating an expansion to store their holiday decorations?

I Hope Your Bags Are Packed

As we close, let me leave you with a thought about paleontology. (We'll discuss this topic more in a future column.) Dinosaurs are still around in the game—if you play D&D Lair Assault™, you're well aware of this fact—so the fossil record of the Underdark isn't as rich as one might think. Nothing stays buried for long. Sure, we bury our dead, create landfills for our trash, and store stuff we don't care about in the leaky basement, but the Underdark is a dangerous place that's always reaching up for us. Not only does the Underdark want to eat us, it's also been going through our garbage and old high school yearbooks for centuries.

How alien is the Underdark? That's up to you. It's a foreign world of bizarre ecosystems, but it's also a realm that you can find just by digging without a permit. And that is fantastic.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to find a place to empty a *bag of holding*.

—Jared, D&D Outsider

P. S. If you figured out that rain sticks are the equivalent of signal flares, used as a way of contacting friends on the surface, congratulations. I'll ask the drow to stop renovating your basement immediately.

About the Author

Jared von Hindman is an artist, writer, and sometime comedian whose comics, paintings and poor choices of words have dwelt upon this very website since 2009. When not drawing on sidewalks in Eternal Chalk, he lairs in Berlin, Germany. Visit Jared on Twitter @JaredvonHindman.

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Character Themes: Fringes of Drow Society

By Doug Hyatt

Illustration by Craig J Spearing

At first glance, the drow of Menzoberranzan might seem like a homogeneous populace of conniving, evil creatures united in fanatical devotion to the Spider Queen. But look a little deeper, and one might notice something different. A slender form clad in black leathers slips through the window of a noble house, whispering a quick prayer to a forbidden god as he draws a blade dripping with venom. In dark caverns beneath the city, a woman with feverish eyes cackles madly as she runs her fingers along slime-covered walls. In a secret chamber, a richly clad human requests a favor from a drow matriarch, and she is pleased to grant it.

This article presents options for those who inhabit the fringes of drow society, including drow who have traded the worship of Lolth for a way of life that better fulfills their own needs.

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Ooze Master

Few drow are mad enough to forsake the ways of Lolth for Ghaunadaur, the elder evil that rules over the disgusting filth of the world. Those who do might become lords of the slime-covered caverns of the Underdark, and command oozes, jellies, puddings, and other aberrations to do their bidding. An ooze master regularly forsakes the comforts of traditional drow society to venture into the cold, wet, dark, and abandoned places of the earth. There, an acolyte of That Which Lurks can study the slimes of the Underdark, with only Ghaunadaur's insane whispers to keep him or her company. When an ooze master walks the halls of drow cities and settlements, he or she strives to keep a low profile, because strange mannerisms and a fascination with aberrant creatures serve only to draw unwanted attention.

An ooze master must fight constantly against whispers of madness that seek to consume the mind. Ghaunadaur desires only to devour the world, and Ghaunadaur's worshipers claim to hear his voice inside their heads, urging them down a path of destruction. With arcane power gifted by the ancient god, an ooze master calls forth corrosive goo to scar and maim opponents. An adherent that is lucky enough to retain some semblance of sanity normally exhibits only a few symptoms of Ghaunadaur's madness, but an episode of full-blown insanity can still strike at a moment's notice.

Worship of Ghaunadaur is forbidden in Menzoberranzan. Even the maddest of acolytes knows better than to invoke foul magic in the presence of Lolth's servants. Traveling with an ooze master is dangerous; many of the Spider Queen's agents have been trained to recognize the telltale signs of insanity.

Character Themes

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore," the first article in this series, from *Dragon* 399.

Creating an Ooze Master

Most ooze masters are wizards, psions, invokers, clerics, or others who have a bookish nature, a strong mind, and a penchant for magical study. An ooze master is usually a disaffected drow, forced to hide dark urges from the bulk of drow society. Sometimes, however, Ghaunadaur seduces humans, tieflings, and members of other races with whispered promises of power.

Starting Feature

Ghaunadaur delights in the suffering of others, especially when scarring his enemies with acid. By channeling arcane power, you can create an explosion of hideous green slime that sears your opponent's flesh and hinders movement.

Benefit: You gain the *sudden slime* power.

Sudden Slime — Ooze Master Attack

A sudden explosion of green slime covers your opponents in corrosive acid.

Encounter ✦ Acid, Arcane, Evocation, Implement
Minor Action **Area** burst 1 within 10 squares
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Highest ability modifier vs. Fortitude
Hit: Your highest ability modifier acid damage, and the target is slowed until the end of your next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

You have spent a great deal of time researching oozes and slimes, as well as studying them in their natural habitats. As such, you have become an expert at foraging and surviving deep beneath the earth, and you have become adept at recognizing oozes, slimes, and other aberrations.

Benefit: When you make a Dungeoneering check, you can roll twice and use either result.

Level 10 Feature

Ghaunadaur blesses his chosen servants with protection from oozes and slimes. Not only is your skin resistant to their acid, your own acid becomes more potent.

Benefit: You gain acid resistance equal to 5 + one-half your level. In addition, when you hit a creature with an acid attack, it grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

Optional Powers

As a worshiper of Ghaunadaur, you have an affinity for oozes, slimes, and other abominations. Your magic can call forth toxic mucus from the dark places of the world in your time of need.

Level 2 Utility Power

Locked chests and barred doors do not hinder you. You can secrete a highly acidic substance that corrodes even the toughest of metals.

Scouring Palm Ooze Master Utility 2

Your hands become coated in a caustic acid that eats through whatever you touch.

Daily ✦ Arcane
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you gain a +5 power bonus to Thievery checks and to Strength checks made to force open, break, or bend wood objects and metal objects.
Sustain Minor: The bonus persists until the end of your next turn.

Level 6 Utility Power

When time is of the essence, you $summon a large, slick patch of jelly that accelerates the movements of all who tread upon it. Imbued with arcane power, the ooze whisks its occupants across the battlefield at breakneck speed.$?

Celerity Jelly Ooze Master Utility 6

You smear the nearby ground with a slick jelly that accelerates your party's movements.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Zone
Minor Action **Close** burst 2
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. The zone is difficult terrain for your enemies. When you or an ally starts his or her turn in the zone, that character can move from one square in the zone to another as a free action.

Level 10 Utility Power

Slimes and puddings have no eyesight, and rely on sound and vibrations to detect their prey. You can establish an arcane conduit with an Underdark pudding and use its senses to detect the movements of creatures near you.

Pudding Sight Ooze Master Utility 10

You gain the senses of a pudding and can detect the faintest vibrations of your enemy's movements.

Daily ✦ Arcane
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You gain tremorsense 10 until the end of the encounter.

Secret Apostate

Some Menzoberranzan drow yearn for a life free from the tyranny of the Spider Queen. These apostate drow have renounced the teachings of Lolth and embraced a philosophy based on individuality and free will. Existence for these secret apostates is dangerous, because they live in constant fear of discovery by Lolth's many spies. If their true nature is discovered, they face certain torture and death.

A secret apostate values freedom and choice, and each pursues personal goals independent of those dictated by other members of drow society or its dark mistress. By no stretch of the imagination does this imply most secret apostates are noble or good; they remain just as selfish and avaricious as other drow. They believe that their aspirations and desires trump those of an overbearing and controlling theocracy.

After renouncing Lolth, a secret apostate usually travels one of two paths. Some develop such a strong hatred for their own society that they actively work to undermine and destroy it. Specializing in elaborate schemes and intrigues, such an apostate might foment a slave rebellion or create conflict between two houses by assassinating a high-ranking official of one house and framing the other for the deed.

Other secret apostates become loners, seeking to avoid others of their kind and to forge their own destinies. One might travel to the surface world, only to wander through foreign lands inhabited by those who distrust or wish to destroy the drow.

Regardless of the path taken, a secret apostate loathes other drow as much as any surface-dweller and does not hesitate to kill members of his or her race if the occasion demands it.

For those who follow the arduous and lonely road of the secret apostate, it is better to risk torture and death as a free drow than to endure an existence of servitude. Let the weak-willed sheep bind themselves to the Spider Queen. A secret apostate lives a life unfettered, or dies trying.

Creating a Secret Apostate

Secret apostates hide in every corner of drow society, linked only by their renunciation of Lolth. Most have some weapon training: fighters, warlords, and rogues slightly outnumber bards, swordmages, and warlocks. Few secret apostates worship gods, so divine classes are rare, but those who do worship a deity favor the gods of the surface-dwellers.

Prerequisite: Drow. All secret apostates are drow who have turned against Lolth.

Starting Feature

A secret apostate cherishes freedom and despises servitude. Through years of training and a formidable desire never to be shackled to another's will, you can cast off any chains that would seek to bind you.

Benefit: You gain the *apostate's freedom* power.

Apostate's Freedom Secret Apostate Attack

You break free of the bonds that hold you and move swiftly to punish your foe.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** or **Ranged** weapon
Effect: Before the attack, you can make a saving throw against a single immobilizing effect on you that a save can end. You also shift up to 2 squares.
Target: One creature
Attack: Highest ability modifier vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + highest ability modifier damage.
Level 21: 2[W] + highest ability modifier damage.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

If agents of Lolth discover your true nature, they would not hesitate to enslave or destroy you. You have become expert in avoiding the scrutiny of others, as well as deceiving those who would question you.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Bluff checks and Stealth checks.

Level 10 Feature

You have honed your mental discipline to razor sharpness. It is difficult for others, especially those of your own kind, to influence you to do their bidding.

Benefit: When a creature makes a charm attack against you, it must roll twice and use the lower result. If that creature is a drow, you also gain a +2 power bonus to the defense targeted by the attack.

Optional Powers

A secret apostate strives to stay away from the Spider Queen's spies. Your training focuses on hiding from those who would destroy you and then striking back.

Level 2 Utility Power

Every apostate dreads that his or her true nature will one day be discovered. When your efforts at deception fail, you must act swiftly to avoid capture.

Caught in a Lie — Secret Apostate Utility 2

You make one final effort to deceive your enemy. If that fails, you prepare to make a run for it.

Daily ✦ Martial
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You fail a Bluff check against an enemy.
Effect: You reroll the Bluff check and use the second result. If you still fail the check, you gain a +6 power bonus to the next initiative check you make within the next hour.

Level 6 Utility Power

Many apostates dedicate their lives to the study of Lolth's servants. You have learned to exploit the weaknesses of her drow and spider followers, and you have spent hours defending against their attacks.

Bane of Lolth — Secret Apostate Utility 6

When facing your greatest enemies, you become a relentless force of destruction on the battlefield.

Daily ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You enter the bane of Lolth stance. Until the stance ends, you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses, as well as a power bonus to damage rolls against drow and spiders equal to your highest ability modifier.

Level 10 Utility Power

Secret apostates stay vigilant and are always on the move. When your enemies are closing in, you can beat a hasty retreat, leaving behind a swiftly conjured cloud of magical darkness.

Dark Retreat — Secret Apostate Utility 10

You glide nimbly across the battlefield, leaving a patch of inky blackness in your wake.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Move Action **Personal**
Prerequisite: You must have the *cloud of darkness* power.$
Effect: You shift up to your speed. If your *cloud of darkness* power is not expended, you can use it at any point during this movement as a free action.

Skulker of Vhaeraun

The power of the priestesses of Lolth in Menzoberranzan is almost absolute, but some residents worship the patron god of male drow, Vhaeraun. Primarily spies, assassins, and thieves, adherents of Vhaeraun slip stealthily through the shadows of the city on missions for the Masked God of Night. Open worship of Vhaeraun is forbidden, so his followers must conceal their allegiance. Many cannot endure the constant fear of capture and flee to the surface world.

Almost all skulkers of Vhaeraun are disenfranchised male drow who are disappointed by their lack of authority and power in Menzoberranzan's matriarchal society. Although some have renounced the evil ways of their people, many Vhaeraun worshipers remain true to drow nature, and they readily lie, steal, and betray if it serves their needs.

A skulker of Vhaeraun excels at getting into and out of hostile areas unnoticed. Consider an assassin who infiltrates a noble manse to slay its occupants with poisonous blades. Imagine a thief slipping into a temple of Lolth to steal a priceless treasure or cutting a dangling purse from an easy mark in a city street. Picture an accomplished spy, who might pose as a consort to a loyal priestess to glean information from her, or who might accept employ in a rival house's guard to overhear secrets. Each of these individuals might worship the Masked Lord.

Poison is the favored weapon of Vhaeraun's servants. A skulker excels in its use, coating his blades and arrows with drow sleep poison or other exotic poisons such as black lotus extract or spotted toadstool venom. The Masked Lord's followers delight in discovering new poisons and pay handsomely to acquire them.

Creating a Skulker of Vhaeraun

Most of Vhaeraun's faithful are surface-dwelling drow. Many skulkers are rogues and assassins, although bards and warlocks might also serve as spies for the Masked God of Night. Divine practitioners are also common. The vast majority of those who serve Vhaeraun are male drow, but a few females also revere him.

Prerequisite: Drow.

Starting Feature

An assassin of the Masked Lord employs deadly toxins to dispatch his or her enemies. By invoking the name of Vhaeraun, you can increase the virulence of your poisons and weaken your opponent's resistance.

Benefit: You gain the *skulker's venom* power.

Skulker's Venom Skulker of Vhaeraun Utility

Your tools drip with the dark malice of the Masked Lord.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Poison, Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, when you hit an enemy with a weapon attack and that enemy is granting combat advantage to you, the enemy takes 4 extra poison damage.
Level 11: 8 poison damage.
Level 21: 12 poison damage.

VHAERAUN AFTER THE SPELLPLAGUE

During a prolonged conflict between Lolth and Eilistraee, who is the patron goddess of good-aligned drow and Vhaeraun's sister, Vhaeraun attempted to assassinate his sister. His plan backfired, and Eilistraee claimed his life. If your DM's campaign takes place after this event, which occurred ten years before the Spellplague, you should discuss how a skulker of Vhaeraun might fit into the campaign.

Some drow, either ignorant of Vhaeraun's death or in denial of it, continue to worship the Masked Lord, and your character might be one of these. You might be dedicated to trying to restore your god to life, channeling divine power that comes from your own dedication to that aim rather than from the god. Or perhaps the power you wield comes from a vestige of Vhaeraun's divine energy—or from another god who has decided to impersonate Vhaeraun and manipulate his followers.

If your DM's campaign takes place before the Spellplague, Vhaeraun and his worship are alive and as healthy as the practice of a forbidden faith can be under the oppressive rule of Lolth's priestesses.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Masters of stealth and secrecy, skulkers of Vhaeraun are often called upon to infiltrate well-guarded houses. You can scale the walls of a noble's compound, leap across rooftops with ease, and duck into the shadows to avoid notice if the need arises.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Acrobatics checks and Stealth checks.

Level 10 Feature

Skulkers of Vhaeraun strike with deadly precision and grace. When using the Masked Lord's preferred weapon, your attacks enfeeble your enemies.

Benefit: When you deal poison damage to a creature, it takes a –2 penalty to the next attack roll it makes before the end of its next turn. This is a poison effect.

Optional Powers

A skulker of Vhaeraun must avoid detection by the priesthood of Lolth, as well as other formidable enemies. In your capacity as a spy and a thief, you rely on powers that conceal your identity and enable you to evade capture in enemy territory.

Level 2 Utility Power

As an expert cat burglar, you can disable mechanical devices and open troublesome locks with finesse and ease. When a dangerous trap threatens you and your companions, however, you rely on the power of the Masked Lord to ward off the bulk of its effects.

Grace of the Masked Lord — Skulker of Vhaeraun Utility 2

With the blessing of Vhaeraun, you and your allies carefully avoid traps that threaten your group.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Shadow, Zone
Minor Action **Close** burst 2
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. While in the zone, you and each ally gain a +3 power bonus to all defenses against traps. In addition, each ally who starts his or her turn in the zone can make a saving throw against an effect caused by a trap that a save can end.
Sustain Minor: The zone persists until the end of your next turn.

Level 6 Utility Power

When stealth and trickery fail, a skulker of Vhaeraun attempts a quick escape. Slipping away into the shadows, you confound pursuit and cloak yourself in a cloud of foul-smelling green poisonous gas to discourage those who would follow.

Noxious Step — Skulker of Vhaeraun Utility 6

You step into the shadows and emerge elsewhere, wreathed in a toxic cloud.

Encounter ✦ Aura, Divine, Poison, Shadow, Teleportation
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You teleport up to 5 squares. Until the end of your next turn, you have partial concealment and an aura 1. When an enemy ends its turn in that aura, that enemy takes 5 poison damage.

Level 10 Utility Power

Devotees of the Masked Lord often need to hide their true forms, both to evade agents of Lolth and to infiltrate enemy houses. With a clever illusion wrought from divine magic, you create drow disguises for you and one of your companions.

Guise of the Faithful — Skulker of Vhaeraun Utility 10

You and your comrade assume the forms of Lolth's faithful servants.

Daily ✦ Divine, Illusion, Shadow
Minor Action **Close** burst 3
Target: You and one Small or Medium ally in the burst
Effect: You transform the auditory, tactile, and visual qualities of the targets' bodies and equipment. Each target assumes the appearance of a drow, and you can choose to provide a target with the appearance of a specific drow whom you have seen.

The illusion lasts for 1 hour, or you can end it as a minor action. A creature can recognize a target's form as illusory with an Insight check opposed by that target's Bluff check. The Bluff check is made with a +5 power bonus.

About the Author

Doug Hyatt is the author of several recent articles in *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines, including "Gond's Way: Artificers of the Realms" in *Dragon* 403 and "Bestiary: Dao and Marid" in *Dungeon* 199. When not designing for D&D Insider™, he enjoys chess, Magic: The Gathering®, and his latest obsession, *Dominion*. He is a computational biologist living in Tennessee, and he has occasionally been known to tweet pearls of wisdom (@doug_hyatt).

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Eye on Eberron

The Kech Ghaalrac

By Keith Baker

Illustration by Wayne England

Commander Utton is dead. Hostile forces are inside the walls. Orcs. Goblins. Some beast with many eyes. Someone is outside my door, killing my guards, and I think his sword is laughing. If this is the last message you receive, the Gathering Stone is lost.

–Tolan Torralyn d'Sivis

It has been two days since the Sentinel Tower received this communication from the Deneith fortress in Darguun, which is also known as the Gathering Stone. The region around the place is blanketed with a powerful effect that disrupts scrying and teleportation, so no one outside that effect yet knows the truth of the situation.

The speed of the assault, the mention of orcs, the mystical wards . . . these parts of the message don't suggest any known force in the region. As for the known forces: Lhesh Haruuc Shaarat'kor welcomed the relationship with Deneith, and the baron of the house is certain this isn't his work. And the Kech Shaarat have rattled sabers for the last few years, but no one reports that they are mobilizing an army in the region.

The truth of the matter is that the goblins that have claimed the Gathering Stone call themselves the Kech Ghaalrac. They are more than just another Dhakaani clan; they are an ancient legend made manifest. If left unchecked, they could destabilize the entire region.

Deneith wants its fortress back, and many people would like to know more about those who took it. After the player characters figure out who has possession of the fortress, will they fight the Kech Ghaalrac? Can they contain the threat without resorting to violence?

The Clan of Heroes

The Kech Ghaalrac—literally "the clan of mighty soldiers"—is more broadly translated as "champions" or "heroes." They are an alliance of Gatekeepers, Dhakaani soldiers, and Khesh'dar assassins that has been fighting the daelkyr continuously for thousands of years. The founders of the clan were the greatest heroes of the Daelkyr War, and the stories of these heroes are still told today (see "Heroes of the Empire").

While the Kech Volaar and their rivals have done their best to preserve Dhakaani traditions and culture from millennia ago, the people of the Kech

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Ghaalrac have been locked in a bitter struggle for survival and the clan has continued to evolve as a result. Kech Ghaalrac forces have blended the techniques of Dhakaani, Gatekeeper, Khesh'dar, and the daelkyr, and the result of this blending has produced a force more powerful than anything seen in the region since the Age of Monsters.

The Kech Ghaalrac originally went into Khyber to protect the empire and reclaim the so-called *First Crown*—the crown of the First Emperor. The clan believed that it couldn't restore the empire until it could reclaim the crown. On 20 Olarune in 994 YK, when the Kech Ghaalrac warlord Khaas won a decisive victory over the daelkyr known as Dyrrn the Corruptor, the warlord seized the crown from Dyrrn's vaults. In the years that followed, the Kech Ghaalrac has been hounding Dyrrn's scattered forces and securing victory—but it has also been preparing to return to the surface and rebuild an empire.

Khaas now leads the small force that has taken over the Deneith fortress with the goal of seizing it for good. The Gathering Stone historically is the site from which Dhakaani leaders issued proclamations to the empire. When he is ready, Khaas intends to demand that all goblin leaders come to him and swear oaths of fealty. The Gathering Stone will be the base from which he will rebuild the legions and drive humanity back into the oceans from which it came. But for now, Khaas has much to learn about the modern world. The bulk of his forces remain in Khyber while he evaluates the situation.

A quick and decisive assault by those who would reclaim the Gathering Stone could contain this fire before it spreads. Even if the Kech Ghaalrac cannot be destroyed, the loss of the *First Crown* would handicap Khaas's ability to compel the loyalty of the modern goblins.

Weapons of Steel and Flesh

The Kech Ghaalrac clan has taken the greatest traditions of its people, blended them together, and improved upon them. Its soldiers are disciplined and hardened from generations of battling aberrants in the depths. Its *duur'kala* (dirge singer) bards have devised new techniques for inspiring troops and instilling terror in foes. Druids provide elemental fire support, and goblin assassins sally forth to slay enemy leaders before a battle is even joined.

The Dhakaani clans have always excelled at metallurgy and weaponsmithing; not even House Cannith can match their techniques. The members of Kech Ghaalrac have continued to improve upon these traditions, and even the rank-and-file Kech Ghaalrac soldiers are equipped with the equivalent of adamantine arms and armor. But such items are the least of their creations. Working together, the Kech Ghaalrac smiths, bards, and druids can create artifacts. These objects cannot be mass produced; each one is unique and requires rare components to create—the blood of a daelkyr, slivers of Khyber dragonshards imbued with a demon's essence, and the like. So the numbers of such artifacts are limited, but over the course of thousands of years Kech Ghaalrac clan members have produced many amazing devices. The ward that shields the Gathering Stone from scrying or

Ur'Taash, the First Crown

The *First Crown*, called *Ur'Taash* by the goblins, was the final work crafted by Jhazaal Dhakaan, the mighty dirge singer who united the warring kingdoms into an empire. Her spirit is bound to it, and between her advice and the ability of the crown to facilitate communication, *Ur'Taash* was a key to the empire's prosperity.

The crown has the following basic capabilities, with the details of each of these qualities to be defined by the needs of the campaign.

Protection: The crown shields its wearer's mind from mental attacks and effects.

Diplomacy: The crown allows the wearer to speak and understand all (or many) languages, and Jhazaal's advice provides bonuses to Insight checks and Diplomacy checks.

Communication: In the age of the empire, Dhakaani officers and governors wore *crown rings* encrusted with Khyber shards. The crown allows the wearer to establish a mind link with anyone wearing such a ring and to link to multiple minds at once. This ability enabled the emperor to direct strategy for forces across Khorvaire, and today the warlord Khaas uses it to coordinate the actions of his clan. The smiths of Kech Ghaalrac haven't yet learned how to make new *crown rings*, but they have a large supply recovered from daelkyr hoards.

Coercion: The original crown had no powers of domination. If Tuura Dhakaan is correct (see "Adventure Ideas"), however, the item in Khaas's possession might not be the true crown—in which case it could be imbued with an enchantment to lure goblin followers and compel them to fight for the wearer.

The use of any of the *First Crown*'s powers requires the consent of Jhazaal's spirit, so a non-Dhakaani is unlikely to receive any benefit from wearing the crown unless he or she can convince the spirit that its cooperation will help the Dhakaani clans in the long run.

teleportation is the product of one such artifact, and the clan has many other tools waiting to be deployed.

The Kech Ghaalrac tribe has another advantage that is far stranger. The Gatekeeper druids who joined the Kech Ghaalrac knew the secret of breeding horrid animals by blending dire beast and dragon. Over thousands of years, they have seized many symbionts from the daelkyr and combined their breeding techniques with daelkyr fleshshaping. This effort has produced a host of strange and terrifying results. The clan uses symbionts of its own, ranging from fleshy constructs like those of the daelkyr to weapons that thirst for blood and secrete acid or venom on command. Clan members have crafted symbionts that interface directly with the nervous system of the user, granting enhanced strength, speed, or regenerative powers. They have even developed a form of resurrection, in which a new body is grown for a hero and memories transferred into it after death.

In addition to these tools, the druids are employing their magebreeding techniques on their own soldiers. The Kech Ghaalrac heroes are physically far more imposing than their normal kin. Although still recognizable as members of their original species, these champions have tough, armored skin with bony protrusions. They heal with remarkable speed, and they have vicious fangs that secrete acidic bile. A single Kech Ghaalrac bugbear is a match for a host of Brelish warriors.

As if this weren't enough, the Kech Ghaalrac clan has one more form of living weapon in its arsenal: bound aberrants. In the long struggle with the daelkyr, the Kech Ghaalrac developed tools and techniques to dominate aberrants, and the clan's forces often include packs of enslaved beholders.

Combining exceptional skill with peerless tools, the Kech Ghaalrac is one of the most powerful fighting forces in Khorvaire. The clan has yet one more advantage: familiarity with the paths of Khyber. The world within Eberron is more than just a system of caves. Tied to the Elemental Chaos, it is a place of raw magic. Natural laws don't always apply in Khyber, and those who know its paths can cross great distances on the surface world in a bizarrely short time. If the Kech Ghaalrac begins aggressive action, knowledge of Khyber can allow its forces to move swiftly, strike by surprise, and flee quickly. Anyone who doesn't know Khyber at least as well as the clan does will have a difficult and dangerous time pursuing the Kech Ghaalrac through the depths.

Heroes of the Empire

The champions who founded the Kech Ghaalrac are long dead, but the greatest heroes of the modern clan have assumed the names and the trappings of the clan's founders. Although this practice bears a surface resemblance to the customs of the Valenar, the name taking is an honor granted to a single exceptional warrior as opposed to an act carried out by every member of the clan.

When a hero is granted an ancient name, that hero also takes up the arms and armor of the champion. In the Ghaal'dar tribes, doing so creates an illusion that the heroes themselves have returned—because there stands mighty Korrga with blood dripping from Laar'shaarat, his laughing sword! Since many Darguuls know these heroes from story, the powerful impact that this naming practice has is similar to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table returning to reestablish Camelot. A few of these heroes are described below.

Khaas

The latest individual to bear the name of Khaas is the hobgoblin warlord who commanded his people to victory over Dyrrn, and who has now seized the Gathering Stone and aspires to be the leader of all goblinkind. Khaas wears *Ur'Taash* and wields a spiked chain that sings as he spins it.

Khaas is furious that the empire of his people has fallen so low, with human cities now standing on the ruins of proud Dhakaan, and he blames clans such as the Kech Shaarat for standing by and letting things come to this. He truly wants what's best for his people, and he believes that he is the only one who knows what that is. He feels that if Tuura Dhakaan and Lhesh Haruuc know what's good for them, they will fall in line and let him rebuild the empire.

The leader of the Kech Ghaalrac inspires tremendous loyalty in his troops, something now enhanced by the *First Crown*. Even if the other goblin leaders resist him, many of their followers will be won to his banner by the strength of Khaas's charisma and the influence of *Ur'Taash*.

Torrm

The first Torrm was the high druid of the Gatekeepers, and her family preserves the old traditions in the Shadow Marches today. Torrm's legendary weapon is a staff studded with Khyber shards, channeling the power of spirits she has bound. The current Torrm wields this weapon, plus wears armor made from the hide of a beholder.

The practices of the Kech Ghaalrac druids have drifted from those observed in the Marches, and the Marcher druids will be dubious about the use of living weapons and bound aberrants. These changes have come about due to the latest Torrm and her people, who have been fighting the daelkyr directly, whereas the present-day Gatekeepers have chosen only to maintain crumbling seals.

When it comes to a wider war, Torrm intends to call on the Marches to ally with Khaas. If the player characters don't interfere, she might convince her clan mates to join his cause.

Korrga

The mightiest champion of the Kech Ghaalrac forces, Korrga is a bugbear barbarian who never flees from battle until the last enemy has fallen. The current Korrga was magebred to be all but indestructible. He has astonishing regenerative powers, such that he can recover from almost any injury within seconds. There is surely a form of damage that he cannot heal, but the characters need to discover that truth through trial and error. He is in the vanguard of any attack, his living greatsword laughing as it drinks the blood of Korrga's foes.

Khesh

A master of assassins, the goblin named Khesh wears a cloak of shadows and never speaks unless she must. It's said that she can pass from one shadow to another, and that she can steal a person's secrets just by looking at him or her.

Though Khesh is less outgoing than the Kech Ghaalrac leader, she believes in Khaas's mission to restore the empire and is prepared to kill anyone who gets in the way, whether that's Lhesh Haruuc or King Boranel. She will do her best to convince the current Khesh'dar to abandon its neutral stance and join with Khaas as the group's ancestors did.

Adventure Ideas

Based on the campaign's needs, the Kech Ghaalrac clan can be a threat for characters in the paragon or epic tier. To make the clan more powerful, scale up the artifacts and bound aberrants, and emphasize that they are magebred and possess unnatural physical prowess. The characters' exposure to the Kech Ghaalrac might be confined to a single adventure—such as reclaiming the Gathering Stone—or it could lead to an entire campaign arc as Khaas brings Darguun, Droaam, and the Shadow Marches together in an effort to drive humanity from Khorvaire and restore the Age of Monsters.

Consider the following possibilities.

- House Deneith wants to know what's going on in and around the Gathering Stone. If information about the attack has leaked out, then groups such as the Trust, the King's Citadel, and House Phiarlan will also want to learn what they can. Are any Deneith heirs still alive inside the fortress? What can the characters learn about the Kech Ghaalrac and its goals? Will the adventurers cooperate with other foes of the goblins, or might representatives from other nations get in their way?
- Many of the major cities of the Five Nations are built on top of Dhakaani ruins. While exploring such ruins, the characters encounter a Kech Ghaalrac strike force sent to recover an artifact or to activate an eldritch machine hidden in the ruins—a precursor to war. This is a way for characters to encounter a party of these powerful goblins with no connection to a larger plot.
- Khaas demands that all goblins swear loyalty to him. Swayed by both the reputation of the Kech Ghaalrac and the power of *Ur'Taash*, many tribes do so. Lhesh Haruuc, the Kech Volaar, and the Kech Shaarat are all holding out, but they are losing followers every day. If Khaas unites the goblin empire, the next step would be seeking new realms to conquer. Breland, Valenar, and Zilargo are all likely targets; where would he go first? Might the Zil choose to ally with the new emperor to protect themselves from his wrath? In addition to the combat possibilities, the characters could become involved with thwarting the Kech Ghaalrac's diplomatic efforts in Droaam and the Shadow Marches.
- Tuura Dhakaan of the Kech Volaar believes that the Kech Ghaalrac isn't what it claims to be. Because this clan fought Dyrrn the Corruptor for thousands of years, she believes that it has been subverted by the daelkyr—and that Khaas is simply building an empire on Dyrrn's behalf. Most of the Kech Ghaalrac forces are still in Khyber; do they include armies of dolgaunts and dolgrims? If this is true, it must be because of the coercive power of what Khaas claims to be the *First Crown*—it's not just Khaas's reputation that's winning followers, it's dark magic. The crown must be destroyed if Khaas is to be stopped.

About the Author

Keith Baker is the creator of the Eberron® campaign setting and designer of the card game *Gloom*. He has no imperial ambitions and isn't an aberrant dressed in human skin. Probably.

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Class Acts:
Seekers of the Moonrise Vanguard

By Doug Hyatt

Illustrations by Miles Johnston

"You must lead your prey into a dark forest, where the spiders crawl and the wisps gather, and the path leading out is only wide enough for one."

—Kelian Rell, Captain of the Moonrise Vanguard

Each night, when the sun dips beneath the horizon and the moon rises above the trees, the fomorians of the Feydark shamble forth from their dank caverns to lay siege to the eladrin city of Shinaelestra. The ranger lord Calenon Thray organizes the Fading City's defenses, dispatching squads of eladrin warriors to combat the fomorian menace wherever the threat is strongest. Foremost among these brave defenders is an elite unit of seekers known as the Moonrise Vanguard. (The city of Shinaelestra is detailed in *Manual of the Planes* and in *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild*.)

Not content to wait for the foe to come to them, each night the seekers of the Moonrise Vanguard leave the safety of the tree-walls of Shinaelestra and venture out into the surrounding forest. Garbed in black armor adorned with the sigil of the Maiden of the Moon, these elite soldiers hunt down the enemies of the Fading City and bring them to justice. From the twisted fomorians of Queen Connomae to the treacherous lycanthropes foolish enough to leave the confines of Brokenstone Vale, from the hungry trolls that roam the Howling Forest to the clever goblins that wait in ambush in the mountain passes, the Moonrise Vanguard pursues its enemies with determination and guile.

Such is the reputation of the Moonrise Vanguard, and its charismatic leader, Captain Kelian Rell, that adventurers hoping to join the order comb the forests and mountains surrounding Shinaelestra in search of one of its fabled hideouts. If such devotees succeed in finding the Moonrise seekers, they might be invited to seek membership. Initiates who navigate the difficult apprenticeship and complete the Journeyman's Hunt take their place among the band as full-fledged members. Many of these seekers venture back out into the world to spread the philosophy of the Moonrise Vanguard, which can be summarized thus:

Live for the chase.
Revel in the hunt.
All else is secondary.
Under the cold light of the moon, everyone is fair game.

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The Hero of Shinaelestra

In taverns throughout the Fading City, patrons raise glasses of feywine and toast the legend of Kelian Rell. Throngs gather to hear the bards sing of the birth of the Moonrise Vanguard. The story began years ago, when a young eladrin named Kelian Rell rose quickly through the ranks of Calenon Thray's rangers. Although Rell was reckless and free-spirited, he proved to be a talented hunter, tracking and pursuing the fomorians from the Feydark at dusk, and the trolls in the Howling Forest after midnight worldfall.

Rell would draw out his hunts of fomorian prey, toying with them as a cat would a mouse. This behavior earned him a reputation as a folk hero renowned for his ingenuity and dramatic flair. One night, during a particularly fierce assault on the city, Rell and his scouts stumbled upon a contingent of fomorian reinforcements. Rell knew that if those reinforcements succeeded in joining the main force assaulting the city, Shinaelestra would fall. Beneath a brilliant full moon, the young lieutenant delivered a stirring plea in defense of his homeland and promised his eternal gratitude if only the Fading City could hold out until midnight. Moved by his prayer, the Maiden of the Moon appeared before the eladrin and bestowed upon him and his seekers a portion of her power.

Suddenly the spirit world opened itself to Rell and his followers, and the beleaguered soldiers summoned the primal forces of the land to come to their aid. Tree branches folded to block the fomorians' path, and black bogs appeared from nowhere to impede the giants' progress. Solid fog rolled through the forest, wrapping its tendrils around the thick arms of the fiendish brutes. Even the lunar spirits came to the seekers' aid, binding the fomorians in strands of silver moonlight. Despite taking heavy losses, Rell and his band survived well past midnight, and Shinaelestra vanished from the Feywild, safe for another day. Deprived of their target, the remaining fomorians fled back to their caverns in the Feydark. Rell was victorious.

When the citizens of Shinaelestra learned of Rell's brave stand, they embraced him and his seekers as heroes. As a reward, Lord Calenon allowed Rell to form his own squadron. The new unit would safeguard Shinaelestra and also serve the agenda of the Maiden of the Moon, the mysterious archfey who had come to their rescue. So the Moonrise Vanguard was born.

The Vanguard's Friends and Foes

Since the vanguard was formed, many creatures have flocked to Rell's banner. In the Feywild, pixies, hamadryads, satyrs, eladrin, and centaurs have come forward. In the mortal world, goliaths from nearby mountains have joined the seekers' ranks, as have elves, shifters, wilden, and half-orcs. Although the eladrin govern the Moonrise Vanguard, they do so with a light hand, acting only to resolve disputes in a mostly free society. Rell has promised the inhabitants that no hunt shall ever be restricted, nor laws made to punish those who engage in the chase.

Quixotic and capricious, members of the Moonrise Vanguard seldom function as a well-oiled military machine. Instead, the structure of the group more resembles that of a ragtag group of bandits or outlaws. The Moonrise seekers have established many hideouts in both the Feywild and the Howling Forest of the mortal realm. Members of the band gather in these secret places to swap tales of the hunt and exchange information about the whereabouts of their enemies. Each seeker strives to outdo the other with the most outlandish tale of a successfully conducted chase. Although the members of the vanguard are fiercely competitive with one another, if a major threat to the Fading City arises, the seekers unite as a single force, reminiscent of the days of old.

In addition to defending Shinaelestra, the Moonrise Vanguard also hunts the enemies of the Maiden of the Moon, lycanthropes foremost among them. The Maiden has tasked the Moonrise Vanguard with hunting these creatures to extinction. Following a bloody war with the eladrin, many werecreatures have settled in Brokenstone Vale (described in *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild*™), where a tenuous treaty prevents the seekers from pursuing their prey. So long as the lycanthropes hold true to their word and remain in the vale, the Maiden reluctantly permits them to live. Nonetheless, the Moonrise Vanguard sends frequent patrols to scout the borders of the vale, for lycanthropes sometimes break the pact and venture into eladrin territory in search of a crossing into the mortal realm.

Of particular note is the ferocious werebear known as Arakag the White, which has slain many of the eladrin, dryads, and other fey creatures who live near the borders of the vale, afterward scrawling threats and taunts in their blood on rocks and trees. The pelt of this terrible foe would prove the ultimate prize, earning a seeker whatever reward she desired from a grateful Kelian Rell.

In the mortal world, the Moonrise Vanguard pursues lycanthropes with impunity, as well as the trolls of the Howling Forest. Attacks from the trolls, in particular, have grown much more organized in recent years. Scouts have seen shadowy figures directing the troll attacks, but these figures vanish into the mist whenever arrow or blade strikes them, leaving only empty cloaks behind. Rell has offered a reward to any who can bring him more information on the trolls and their mysterious new allies. Capturing one of the unknown assailants would be a sure way to prove one's worth to the seekers of the Moonrise Vanguard.

The spirits of the night, the moon, and the dark forest places heed the Moonrise seekers' call. The

seekers excel at creating gateways from the mortal world to treacherous locations in the Feywild, such as enchanted woods teeming with will-o'-wisps, or black bogs filled with corrosive slime. In the Feywild, Rell's seekers align themselves with the gloaming fey and swear allegiance to the Maiden of the Moon. Indeed, many of the human and elf seekers fervently believe themselves to be part gloaming fey, even those who do not have a fey origin.

Joining the Moonrise Vanguard

For a mortal hunter to join Kelian Rell's seekers, she must first cross into the Feywild and locate a hideout of the Moonrise Vanguard. This is no easy task. Goblins and giants patrol many of the mountain passes, trolls and fomorians roam the forest paths, and wyverns and rocs soar through the skies searching for easy meals. If an adventurer navigates her way through these hazards, she must then deal with the Moonrise seekers themselves. Fiercely protective of their domains, and playful by nature, the members of the Moonrise Vanguard toy with any travelers who draw close to one of their hidden glades or grottoes. The seekers attempt to spook the adventurer with primal magic ranging from shimmering moonbeams to unsettling fog, and with noises such as those of arrows thudding into trees, the howling of wolves, or the skittering of giant claws upon the rocks.

If the candidate runs, the chase commences, and the hunters of the Moonrise Vanguard harry their prey for as long as it amuses them. If she stands her ground and continues to scout for the campsite, the seekers, impressed, will emerge from hiding and welcome the stranger into their midst. If the aspirant shows talent in evading the chase, or finds a way to turn the tables on her pursuers, members of the Moonrise Vanguard might choose to reveal themselves and invite the mortal into their midst.

Apprentice's Training

An adventurer who proves her worth can train to become a Moonrise seeker. Seasoned veterans instruct apprentices in everything from archery and tracking to calling upon the primal spirits for aid. Capricious teachers give their students cryptic commands, such as "Bring me the smile of a tree" or "Strike the moon with your arrow." Many of these tasks cannot be completed but are given out for the instructors' amusement. Becoming a Moonrise seeker is as much a test of creativity as it is of skill.

Much of the training occurs at night, when aspiring seekers learn how to track by moonlight and fire an arrow accurately in near darkness. Daytime is spent in meditation, communing with the wild spirits of the beasts, trees, rocks, and rivers. Under the soft moonlight, the students learn to call on the night spirits for aid. Summoned mist spirits surround the student in a cloak of billowing fog. Tidal spirits pull and tug at the pupil's clothing. Moonlight spirits envelop the seeker in a soft halo, illuminating the dark forest paths and treacherous mountain passes. Ultimately, the apprentice strives to call upon the spirits to tear open the veil and create a passage into the Feywild. Once a student has mastered walking between the two worlds and forging gateways with the aid of the spirits, then the masters deem her ready for the final test: the Journeyman's Hunt.

The Journeyman's Hunt

In order to join the ranks of the Moonrise seekers, the apprentice must complete a ceremony known as the Journeyman's Hunt. After a day (or night, depending on when the hunt is to take place) of celebration, filled with feywine and bard song, the young seeker journeys out into the wild to stalk her chosen prey. Any intelligent creature can serve as the target of the hunt. Many aspirants, hoping to curry favor with the Maiden of the Moon, choose a lycanthrope that has ventured forth from Brokenstone Vale. Others select more difficult and elusive prey, such as a witch of the Dark Moon Coven, or a chieftain of the goblin tribes.

Veteran seekers shadow the pupil during the hunt, watching for mistakes and judging the quality of her pursuit. Not only must the apprentice flush the target out and stalk it through the wilderness, but she must also demonstrate a certain style in manipulating and harrying the chosen prey. The hunt must not end too soon, lest the seeker be deemed impatient and lacking in appreciation for the fine art of the chase. Neither must the chase stretch on for too long, else the apprentice's skills as a seeker might be called into question.

Not all Journeyman's Hunts end in the death of the prey. In some cases, a seeker stalks a human from the mortal realm and takes him or her as a lover. Other times, the student might capture the prey and leave some mark or token of the hunt behind before releasing the prisoner back into the wild. Some hunts do end in blood, though, especially when an aspiring seeker stalks a werebeast in the name of the Maiden of the Moon.

If the apprentice succeeds in the Journeyman's Hunt, Kelian Rell welcomes her into the ranks as a full-fledged seeker of the Moonrise Vanguard. If the student fails, all is not lost. Barring a complete display of incompetence, she can try again in a year's time.

After the Hunt

Seekers who remain in Shinaelestra devote their lives to the pursuit of the city's enemies. They commune with the primal spirits of the mountains, lakes, and forests, and continue to refine their archery and tracking skills. Many of the seekers venture to the mortal realm in search of new and interesting prey on which to hone their abilities. Adventuring parties can sometimes be put off by the capricious, playful nature of the Moonrise seeker, whose tendency to play practical jokes on her comrades can annoy or backfire. Nonetheless, a seeker of the Moonrise Vanguard is a

valuable addition to any party, able to read the signs of nature, to track prey to its lair, and to dispatch it to the Feywild with a swift call to the primal spirits. Wherever the seeker roams, be it the Feywild or the mortal realm, be it alone or with a group of companions, the hunt goes with her. As Kelian Rell says:

Life is brief, but the chase is eternal.

Roleplaying Options

The seekers of the Moonrise Vanguard share a single-minded love of the hunt and a mercurial, cunning nature, but many of them differ in their overall goals and motivations for adventuring. Below are a few ideas to consider when roleplaying a Moonrise seeker.

Instrument of the Maiden

A devout servant of the archfey known as the Maiden of the Moon, you believe that the blood of the gloaming fey courses through your veins. You are even more capricious than normal for a Moonrise seeker, and your mood changes like the wind. You delight in deceiving your enemies and playing practical jokes on your friends. The concerns of mortals matter little to you, for what are they compared to the more important whims of a fey creature such as yourself?

On behalf of the Maiden, you seek out and destroy lycanthropes. No purpose is more important than stamping out these ferocious rivals. Cold iron frightens you, for it binds you to the mortal realm. (You also believe that it will sear your flesh, whether or not by nature you are actually a creature of fey.)

Roleplaying Tips: During a crescent moon or a new moon, you tend to be cold, aloof, and otherworldly. When the moon gleams full in the sky, you become the consummate prankster. Few things other than lycanthropes make you genuinely angry, and mortal concerns don't seem overly important to you (even if you are mortal yourself), and you can easily get lost in your own pursuits.

Witch Hunter

When clerics require an expert to locate and capture someone suspected of witchcraft, they call upon you to hunt the witch down and bring him or her to justice. You have trained in arcane lore and have learned how to recognize the ways of witches and the telltale signs of witchcraft (such as familiars and moon magic). You keep various trinkets and charms that you believe protect you from a witch's power, and you are a formidable adversary of any witch that crosses your path.

You do not hate witches, for they too serve the moon in their own way. Indeed, you are fascinated by every aspect of a witch's existence, from the bonding of arcane familiars to the philosophies of the witches' moon covens. You delight in matching wits with these powerful foes, and secretly hope to capture a witch and somehow take his or her power as your own. Often, succeeding in the chase is more important than returning the witch to face justice, and you will frequently release your captured prey, provided he or she offers you a better reward than your employers.

Roleplaying Tips: You are fascinated by arcana, especially arcane knowledge relating to the night, the moon, and the bonding of familiars. You have a much more mercenary outlook than is typical for a Moonrise seeker, often deciding the target of your hunt based on the size of a proffered reward. You are superstitious by nature and believe that charms and trinkets have genuine power.

Shinaelestra Defender

Upon completing your training in the Moonrise Vanguard, you chose to remain for a time in your mentor's ancestral home, the Fading City of Shinaelestra. Under the tutelage of Kelian Rell, you became an expert dungeoneer, able to ferret out fomorians, cyclopses, and other giantkin from their underground lairs in the Feydark.

Now you have left Shinaelestra behind for the mortal realm, where you use your talents to aid those less fortunate than yourself. Wherever the strong prey on the weak, you come to the aid of those in need, hunting down the aggressors until the threat no longer remains. In the mortal world, you bear a special hatred for creatures of the Underdark, especially the foul drow and their minions.

Roleplaying Tips: You are a steadfast and loyal companion, you seek the approval of others, and you feel as though you constantly have something to prove. If someone wrongs one of your allies, you will hunt the perpetrator down.

New Seeker Powers

The seeker powers in this section expand on those found in *Player's Handbook 3* and other sources. These powers are among your options when you choose seeker powers for the given levels.

Level 1 At-Will Power

When you strike at your foes, lunar spirits flood the area of your volley, pulling your enemies with the ebb and flow of the tides.

Tidal Spirit Shot Seeker Attack 1

Spirits of the lunar tides tug at your prey.

At-Will ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Area** burst 1 within weapon range
Target: Each enemy in the burst
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] damage, and you can slide the target 1 square.
Level 21: 2[W] modifier damage.

Level 3 Encounter Power

Few environments in the Feywild are more inhospitable than the feymires of the Murkendraw. A quick shot sends your target into a black swamp in the Murkendraw. The sludge from the foul bog encases your enemy's weapons.

Into the Black Bog — Seeker Attack 3

You momentarily cast your enemy through a dark swamp in the Feywild. The foe returns covered in a thick mud, which blunts its attacks.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Wisdom modifier damage, you can teleport the target 1 square, and the target takes a penalty to damage rolls equal to your Wisdom modifier until the end of your next turn.

Level 9 Daily Power

You cast your enemies into a patch of dense webs in the Feywild. Your enemies blunder through the webs, where poisonous spiders latch on to their flesh and sap their strength.

Spider Thicket — Seeker Attack 9

You hurl your foes through a thicket of webs in the Feywild. They return covered in translucent venomous spiders, which gnaw at their flesh.

Daily ✦ Poison, Primal, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within weapon range
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Wisdom vs. Fortitude
Hit: The target is weakened and takes ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends both).
Effect: You teleport the target to a square in the burst.

Level 13 Encounter Power

Lunar spirits haunt your attack, binding your enemy in cold moonlight.

Bonds of Moonlight — Seeker Attack 13

You bind your foes in strands of silver moonlight.

Encounter ✦ Cold, Primal, Radiant, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** or **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a light thrown weapon or a heavy thrown weapon to make a melee attack with this power.
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + 1d8 + Wisdom modifier cold and radiant damage, and the target is restrained (save ends).

Level 17 Encounter Power

Your attack allows a living forest of the Feywild to partially manifest in your reality. These awakened, semisolid trees immediately dislike your enemies.

Spectral Forest — Seeker Attack 17

Your shot conjures a ghostly copse that harries and hinders your foes while protecting you and your allies.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Psychic, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within weapon range
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. The zone is difficult terrain for your enemies, and any enemy that enters the zone or ends its turn there takes 15 psychic damage (an enemy can take this damage only once per turn). You and your allies have partial cover while in the zone.

Level 23 Encounter Power

You can momentarily transform a creature into a wisp of light, not unlike the will-o'-wisps that haunt the black bogs of the Feywild. In this form, the target becomes a cursed mote that thwarts its allies and hinders their abilities.

Wisp Shot — Seeker Attack 23

Your attack changes an enemy into an irksome will-o'-wisp.

Encounter ✦ Polymorph, Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + 1d8 + Wisdom modifier damage, and the target assumes the form of a Tiny wisp of light (save ends). In this form, the target gains a fly speed of 6 (hover) and is dazed, and it cannot use standard or minor actions. All of the target's equipment transforms with it.
Effect: Any enemy within 5 squares of the target when you make the attack cannot teleport or use immediate actions until the end of your next turn.

Level 25 Daily Power

You create a gateway into the Feywild in the form of a grotto of slippery stones and cascading falls. The veil is thin, enabling you to transport your foes to the Feywild with each of your attacks.

Fading Grotto — Seeker Attack 25

You open the way to a starlit grotto into which you dispatch one opponent after another.

Daily ✦ Primal, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Primary Target: One creature
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. Will
Hit: 1[W] + 1d8 + Wisdom modifier damage, and the target is removed from play until the end of your next turn.
Effect: The attack creates a zone of difficult terrain in a burst 2 centered on the target. The zone lasts until the end of your next turn. Enemies in the zone grant combat advantage.
Sustain Minor: The zone persists until the end of your next turn, and you make the secondary attack.
Secondary Attack
Secondary Target: One enemy in the zone that has not been targeted by this secondary attack
Attack: Wisdom vs. Will
Hit: The secondary target is removed from play until the end of your next turn.

Level 27 Encounter Power

The most powerful seekers can draw foes through the Feywild in a particularly unsettling manner.

Fey Commander's Lure Seeker Attack 27

Your attack not only teleports your enemies but also leaves them visibly shaken.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within weapon range
Target: Each enemy in the burst
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier damage, and you can teleport the target to a square within 3 squares of you. In addition, the target takes a -5 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, when you hit an enemy with a ranged attack, you can teleport it to a square within 3 squares of you as a free action right after the attack. In addition, the target takes a -5 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.

Paragon Path

The elite hunters of the Moonrise Vanguard live for the chase. Once a seeker engages its prey, she does not return until one of them is captured or dead. Defeating the enemy, however, is not the only goal. The seekers savor the pursuit, hounding their quarry with cunning and style.

Drawing their power from the primal magic of the veil, the Moonrise seekers dispatch their opponents into the Feywild with the aid of the lunar spirits. In service to the Maiden of the Moon, these seekers try to keep their enemies off balance, using powers such as *lunar transposition* and *echoing shot* to rearrange the battlefield as they see fit.

Moonrise Stalker

Prerequisite: Seeker

Level 11: Entangling Moonlight

Whenever you teleport your enemies, they become entangled in strands of silver moonlight.

Benefit: When you use a teleportation power to teleport an enemy, that enemy is also slowed until the end of your next turn.

Level 11: Sly as Twilight

Prey will use all manner of tricks to elude you, but you can resist efforts to hinder your pursuit.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to make an attack that would push, pull, or slide an enemy, you can instead teleport it up to half that number of squares (minimum 1). Where you teleport the enemy remains subject to any restrictions on the original forced movement. The attack gains the teleportation keyword.

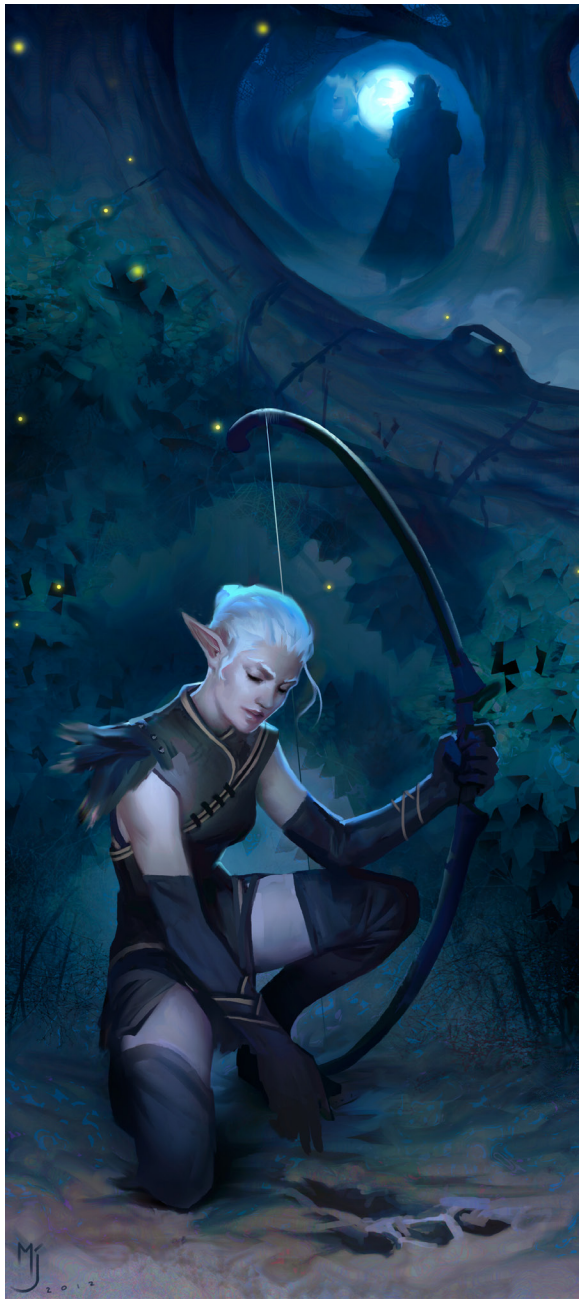
Level 11: Lunar Transposition

Lunar spirits carry you and your opponent through the fey passages, switching your positions.

Lunar Transposition Moonrise Stalker Attack 11

This attack opens a passage through the Feywild, connecting you and your foe.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + 1d6 + Wisdom modifier damage, and you can teleport up to 10 squares, swapping places with the target.
Special: You can use this power as a ranged basic attack.



Level 12: Moonbeam Step

You conjure a beam of moonlight, disappear into it, and reappear elsewhere inside a shimmering cloud.

Moonbeam Step — Moonrise Stalker Utility 12

You step through a patch of moonlight into the Feywild, emerging elsewhere. The moonlight forms a clinging, protective nimbus around you.

Encounter ✦ Aura, Primal, Teleportation
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You teleport up to 5 squares. In addition, you activate an aura 1 that lasts until the start of your next turn. Any enemy in the aura takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls.

Level 16: Anchoring Spotlight

Each of your strikes traps your opponent in a beam of moonlight, rendering it unable to teleport.

Benefit: When you hit an enemy with a ranged basic attack, that enemy cannot willingly teleport until the end of your next turn.

Level 20: Distant Echo

When you hit with this attack, echoes of your enemy's pain are felt in other creatures. While they are in agony, you can change places with one of them.

Distant Echo — Moonrise Stalker Attack 20

Echoes of this attack can harm other enemies nearby, and their pain can create a threshold through which you can step.

Daily ✦ Primal, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + 1d6 + Wisdom modifier damage. Up to three other creatures within 10 squares of the target take damage equal to half the damage dealt to the target.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You can teleport to swap positions with one creature that takes damage from this attack. An enemy teleported by this effect is dazed until the end of your next turn.

About the Author

Doug Hyatt is the author of several recent articles, including "Gond's Way: Artificers of the Realms" (*Dragon* 403) and "Bestiary: Dao and Marid" (*Dungeon* 199). He enjoys chess, Magic: The Gathering, and *Dominion*. He is a computational biologist living in Tennessee and has occasionally been known to tweet pearls of wisdom (@doug_hyatt).

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Janthar's Surprising Journey

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Eva Widermann

For more than a decade now, gamers who attend GenCon have been invited to torment a long-suffering Wizards of the Coast scribe, and yours truly the bearded Father of the Realms, with story ideas: characters, beasties, names, words, items magical and otherwise, situations, plot elements, and so on. I sing, I dance, and seminar attendees try to stop me. Later—usually much later—I sit down and try to cobble together some sort of story from the assembled suggestions, and another Spin A Yarn is born. They're usually silly and somewhat humorous, but I live in hope that we'll do a serious one, some year (hint, hint, folks!).

Welcome to the latest installment in the not-so-Secret History of the Realms. As always, real-world people, places, and things, jarringly modern elements, and thoroughly inappropriate suggestions get left out. Everything else—and I mean everything, though often twisted to make it fit or even disguise it a bit—makes it in.

So, blame for some of the jests and lapses in taste can be shared. You know who you are.

As usual, everything else is my fault.

Chapter 1
The Storm before the Siege

". . . and that's why the good guys always win! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Ho ho hee hee and various large guffaws of mirth," Janthar the Brightsash Bard agreed politely, managing not to yawn. Just, and only by a titanic effort that left his face momentarily a mite purple.

The fat minstrel across the table stopped laughing and looked annoyed. "Hey! That was a *good* one!"

"Around here, perhaps," Janthar said gently, signaling the tablemaid with a smile and a raised hand.

She bustled over eagerly, possibly because of the silver coin shining between his fingers. "Yes, lord?"

"I'll have the Internal Disgust and the Army of Zombies in Sauce, and then finish it off with Custard's Last Stand."

"Very good choices, lord. This night's custard is garlic flavored."

"Ah. Well, in that case, double the wine. Not a vampire problem, I trust?"

The maid looked horrified. "Oh, *no*, lord! Not around here! Never!"

"Ah, that's good to hear." Janthar gave her his best smile. She matched it, made his coin disappear down her bodice without appearing to use her fingers, and scurried off to the kitchens, visibly relieved. So this castle had vampires. Great.

He returned his attention to fat Melgor the Minstrel, who'd used the time Janthar had spent conversing with the maid to vigorously stir his stew of memories. He was eager to share what had turned up.

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"Heard the one about the halfling rogue who put a cursed ring on his finger, and became a she? Took away where he liked to carry—"

"As it happens," Jantharl said sourly, "I *have* heard that one. And the one you're going to offer me next, too. 'There once was an orc from . . .' "

The steady, expressionless look Jantharl shot across the table was a clear challenge.

Melgor met it with a scowl. "Mind reader!" he snapped. "Using magic, aren't you? That's cheating, that is." Then he brightened again. "Oh, oh, here's one! A tale that stars a hero who's afraid of wide open spaces *and* small, cramped rooms, too! He—"

"Hangs around in doorways a lot," Jantharl murmured. "I've heard that one, too."

Melgor looked distinctly hurt. "I'll have you know the Wondrous Strange Tales Society lauded me as the best minstrel between Tammar and Phent!"

"And I'm sure you are," Jantharl said affably, not failing to notice that the lone ring on the fat man's fingers was a plain affair that did not bear the book symbol of the Society. "I mean no disrespect, most eloquent Melgor. I just seem to be in a . . . foul mood. The armies I saw massing both east and west of this place might have something to do with it."

"Oh," Melgor replied, mollified. "That'd be a few Thayan patrols who've banded together to test how much our fair realm wants to keep Thaelfortress . . . that's Fort Thesk to you outlanders. The Thayans have taken to doing that every few months, these last two summers."

Jantharl raised an eyebrow. "And the opposing force? It looked rather larger than anything the merchants of Thesk would be apt to sponsor."

"Heavy knights from Impiltur, only too happy to slake their lances with the blood of detested Thayans and get in some battle practice. They asked permission of all the city merchant councils, and received it. After leaving two wagons brimming full of gold that are forfeit if they don't leave our soil after the fighting's done."

"Huh. So it's Impiltur against Thay. The wise versus the smart. Or perhaps the fools against the inscrutably undead. So why haven't the local merchants fled full-wheel out of here? Leaving aside the danger, a great brawling battle would seem to get in the way of trade."

Melgor chuckled. "They have, Saer Bard. Nigh everyone within the walls at this point is an outlander like you, here for adventure or to try to make coin off a siege."

"Siege?"

"Oh, aye. The Thayans never give battle in the open. They're here to practice their siegecraft. They'll beat drums and sound war horns until the knights from Impiltur come inside the castle. Then they'll surround us—and then they'll attack."

Jantharl shook his head. "I'd heard Thayans were crazed, but . . . aren't you afraid they'll win? And butcher you horribly, ere turning you into one of their undead slaves?"

"No," Melgor replied cheerfully. "I'm a minstrel. Exempt."

"Exempt? From Thayan swords? Who told you so?"

The fat minstrel beamed. "A Thayan trader. Met him in Nyth three summers back. He swore it by his father and mother."

"Whom he neglected to name, no doubt. Tell me, did anyone trust him enough to trade with him?"

Melgor frowned. "I know not. I never asked. He was dealing in . . ."

"Battle-bones for alchemists? Jars of monster blood and tentacles?"

The minstrel brightened again, nodding. "Yes! He *was*! B'Tymora, you're good!"

"Not good enough," Jantharl said grimly, getting up. "But if I can move as fast as a hrasted lightning bolt, I just might get clear of this castle before—"

Whatever else he'd been saying was lost in a sudden roll of thunder that swallowed all other sounds and set the very roof of the inn above them to rattling. Doors and windows banged open, and the gathering dusk outside burst into blinding white brightness.

Then it went dark—just before flashing again, to the accompaniment of a scream and the reek of cooked horseflesh.

Thunder clapped again, this time sounding like someone had dropped several wagonloads of armor on the roof.

Melgor looked mournful. "Someone forgot to get their horse inside in time." Then he brightened. "All the more for the kitchens, though." He rubbed his hands. "I love a good horse pie, don't you? Big as a shield, all golden brown crust and steaming, diced—"

"Unmentionables inside," Jantharl finished for him. "In gravy." He swung his cloak around his shoulders. "The moment that lightning's farther off, I'll retrieve my mount from the stables and—"

"Oh, but it won't," the minstrel warned. "Get farther off, that is. This isn't any gods-sent storm, it's the Thayans. They do this before every battle. The streets won't be safe until they've surrounded us. They send bolts of lightning snarling all over, once every few breaths or so. I imagine those knights are going to shed their armor right speedily, and their horses' barding, too, and come in here in their under-leathers."

As if in confirmation, lightning spat through one of the storm-opened windows and crackled along one side of the inn's common room. Sparks showered from ancient shields hanging on the wall.

Jantharl sat down again, offering all the curses he could remember to the ceiling. It seemed not to hear, perhaps because it was busy shaking from a fresh roll of thunder.

Melgor listened with interest, looking increasingly impressed.

The next strike was accompanied by a thunderous hammering on the inn's front door.

Since he was on his feet already, Jantharl got to the door first.

He was less than surprised to find a crowd of surly, drenched warriors in scorched leather outside, all heavy stubble and angry glares. They pushed past him without greeting.

"Tluining Thayans and their storms! If skeletons and zombies felt the wet, they'd change horses in a hurry!"

"Say, now—that's a banner-bright thought, right there! Get an archmage to craft a spell to make skeletons and zombies dissolve in rain! That'd put some cold fingers of fear up Red Wizard backsides, that would!"

"Huh! The only cold fingers Red Wizards feel belong to Szass Tam!"

"Ale! Ale!"

"Any roasts hot and ready?"

"*Ho*, the kitchens!"

"Can we get a catoblepas? Properly marinated?"

Jantharl got back to his table in time to accept his bowl of Internal Disgust before it could vanish down an Impilturan gullet. It was hot and drenched in a sickly-looking greenish-brown gravy . . . and it proved to be well named. His stomach heaved.

"The trick," Melgor observed smugly, watching him with amusement, "is to drink heavily. Wine, for preference. It sluices all the grease and gristle down, so to speak."

"*Mar*velous," Jantharl growled, his innards rising again.

"Well, if you're going to spew in it, *I'll* eat it," one of the knights from Impiltur snarled, snatching the bowl out of Jantharl's hands.

Jantharl let it go without battle. But when his wine arrived and many hairy Impilturan hands reached for the decanter, he let fly with his steel-toed boots, displaying both savage eagerness and deft expertise. He managed to win time and space enough to down most of it in one long, fiery pull.

"Buy your own!" he snapped, in tones of ringing command that he hoped these burly hulks around him were accustomed to obeying. Then he drained the jack, belched heartily in a few Impilturan faces, and found his feet again.

"Ho, bard, where're you off to, hey?" the innkeeper barked from the kitchen door. "You owe three silver so far, an' then there's the stabling!"

"Checking on my horse!" Jantharl barked right back. "The lightning and all!"

"No fear, my stable's're set proper to snare lightning! Your beast'll be right as rain, I'll swear!"

As if on cue, rain—or perhaps hail—fell upon the inn roof like several hundred hard-armored fists. The din was augmented by a deluge that erupted from one corner of the common room ceiling, causing several knights to hastily abandon their table.

"Farruking Thayans," an Impilturan growled feelingly. "Ho, housemaster! You do have a roast spitted and nigh done, aye? A large wild boar, or something bigger?"

"Of course!" the innkeeper replied. "This *is* the finest inn in Thaelfortress!"

"It's the only inn in Thaelfortress," the knight growled back.

The common room ceiling promptly sprang another leak—right over his head.

The Impilturan's curses, offered from the midst of the torrent, were far more graphic and crude than Jantharl's.

Melgor the Minstrel, listening hard as he took firm possession of Jantharl's Army of Zombies in Sauce, looked suitably impressed.

Chapter 2
The Statue in the Courtyard

The sky overhead split in an even more spectacular explosion of lightning. Bright bolts arced in all directions, lancing from the mountains to the roiling clouds and back again in blinding volleys.

Jantharl winced, grabbing at his eyes. "Are the Red Wizards trying to outdo Lantanna fireworks, or something?"

"That'll be the last one," Melgor offered. "They always end with that. Very soon now it'll be safe to set foot outside."

Jantharl turned in the slackening downpour to give him a level, sour look. "Thank you for that timely advice, friend minstrel."

"You're welcome," the fat man chirped cheerfully, either missing the sarcasm or ignoring it. Rainwater streamed from his beard as if his chin were a tap.

The hammering rain had eased enough that Jantharl could see his surroundings. The "castle" that was Thaelfortress was a great irregular ring of curtain walls backed up against soaring mountainside cliffs. Within those walls was a small stone city or a large stone town, all cobbles and very solid, thick-walled stone buildings with slate or tile roofs, and not a tree or a patch of greenery to be seen.

Its inns flew banners so visiting outlanders could find them, and contrary to what the knight had said, Jantharl had counted five thus far. All such flags were attached to large, ugly, rambling buildings he knew to be bulging with large, hairy, bad-tempered knights from Impiltur. Hungry, wet, missing their armor and swords—and not happy about it. The brawls would be raging in earnest, about now. Just as the siege of undead armies in their uncounted lurching, staggering thousands began.

Bah. He'd not picked a good time to take shelter in this particular unfriendly and primitive backland settlement.

A chill wet mist blanketed the ground, which according to a cheerful Melgor, was normal most of the year. The cold, drenching rain pelted down without dissipating the swirling fog in the slightest. The streets were ankle-deep in water, despite the loud gurgles of drains coming from seemingly everywhere.

Not surprisingly, the minstrel and the bard were alone in the streets. They'd come two or three blocks from the inn, and stood in the widest street Jantharl had yet found in the city. Ahead, it widened into a large, open, rain-swept space that had some sort of statue on a plinth in the center.

"The Great Mustering Yard of Thesk," Melgor announced grandly, indicating the open space with a flourish.

Thunder rolled again, like divine indigestion, and a spark snapped into being at the end of his pointing finger. He winced and jerked that injured digit back, dancing in pain among the deep puddles.

"Of course it is," Jantharl agreed, looking at the growing lake that covered most of the courtyard. He noticed the litter of poles and rotting awnings that leaned against distant walls. *Mustering yard?* he thought. *Street market, more like it.* "Who's yon statue immortalize?"

"No one knows, anymore—or rather, no one agrees about who it is," the minstrel replied, wringing his scorched hand. "The inscription's gone."

"Just the inscription?" the bard asked, sloshing on through the deepening water. He was close enough to the statue now to see its spectacular curves. Female, decidedly buxom, and . . . *dragon-headed?*

She was sculpted in exquisite detail, in a dramatic, even heroic pose. Her front foot was slightly raised as if to stride forward, with one hand on the opposite shapely hip and her other outthrust like a lance, pointing on across the great open courtyard in the direction they'd been headed. Various rotting loops of cord hung from her limbs, no doubt where enterprising merchants had slung lines of merchandise or banners crying the names and wares of their businesses to the passing Realms. There'd once been a legend engraved on a large name block under the statue, but someone had attacked it with enthusiasm and a good set of mason's tools. Years back, judging by the hue and the condition of the ravaged stone.

"Just the inscription. As you can see, someone chiseled it away, but they like to say around the castle that it just wore away under centuries of scrawled profanity," Melgor admitted, joining Jantharl. "She's a dragonborn, as you can see. Nothing broken or missing except the name."

"Dressed as a monk."

The minstrel nodded. "Said to be of Deneir, and from Candlekeep. Her lips move from time to time, though no sound comes out. They say she remembers the future, because she's living backward. Soon she'll reach the moment she became a statue."

"And then what?"

"No one knows—or rather, no one can agree. Some say she was alive, and got petrified."

"Of course. What's she pointing at?"

"Violatarr's Magnificent Mansion of Taste Violations. Our local festhall."

Jantharl chuckled. "Well, this is the first statue I've seen that's useful to someone other than a pigeon, then. Lusty visiting outlanders, hie thyselves this way." He squinted through the rain, which seemed to be letting up a little, in the direction the anonymous dragonborn monk was pointing. "So what's yon statue over the festhall door, then?"

"A giant dire siege rat, wearing a monocle. No, don't ask, because no one knows. It just appeared one morning. The work of a wizard who shapechanged and then petrified an enemy, perhaps—but that's just my guess."

"And the festhall . . . how is it?"

"Well . . ." Melgor coughed. "A better shelter against the Thayan bombardments than the open courtyard, to be sure!"

"Thayan—?"

Just then, something hurtled out of the drizzle. Something large and dark and—abruptly splattered all over the courtyard beyond in a great soppy *splurpf* that covered a wide fan of cobbles with disgusting wetness.

"*These* Thayan bombardments," the minstrel said helpfully, dodging behind the statue. Jantharl joined him hastily, peering at the dead whatever-it-was adorning the cobbles. It seemed to have a fin, a sinuous line that thrust up grotesquely from the largest lump of spreading, sticky chaos.

"Land shark," Melgor supplied. "Bulette. Transported here by siege engine."

Jantharl raised an eyebrow. "Traditionally begins the barrage?"

The minstrel smiled and nodded. "Indeed. *Cooked* land shark, mind. So the populace of the besieged fortress won't go hungry."

"Indeed," Jantharl agreed darkly, surveying the ichorous mass again. "Yet I find myself less than ravenous, somehow."

"Wait until they start using the cattlepult," Melgor said brightly, "and the slings-hits."

"Slings-hits? They, ah, fling chamber pot leavings, beast dung, that sort of thing?"

"You're quick!"

"Well, I *am* a bard," Jantharl pointed out. "An anointed, official liar and tall-tale teller. Conclusions are things bards leap at, wildly and all the time."

The fat minstrel chuckled. "I knew it would be entertaining, tagging along with you! Now we'd better make a run for it, before the real bombardment starts. So . . . to the festhall, or Fzoul's Tongue, beyond, or back to the inn?"

"What," Jantharl asked, suppressing a sigh, "is Fzoul's Tongue?"

"Yon street, over there, on around yon bend. Named for the risen exarch Fzoul Chembryl, he who—"

"Yes, yes, I know who Fzoul is, but why is it named for him? He didn't lick its cobbles with his tongue, or some such, did he?"

"Well, ah, yes he did, in, uh, a manner of speaking. He appeared here in the castle—at the far end of the Tongue, where it meets four other streets, and there's a tavern of sorts, that I'll take you to if you'd like. He was surrounded by the dark power of Bane, a huge high towering shroud of very impressive glowing blackness, with little blood-stars dancing all over it. Anyhail, he appeared, all suddenlike, to denounce a few betrayers of Bane who'd come here to dwell in hiding. They took one look at him and fled like blazes down yon street. So Fzoul spat out a spell that made his tongue into a long, racing carpet that ran along the walls of the buildings to outpace them before swerving down to the cobbles in front of them. Then it snapped back to him, rolling them all up as prisoners in front of Fzoul."

"And then he swallowed them like a froghemoth," Jantharl said sarcastically.

Meglor stared at him, crestfallen. "Oh. You've already heard all about it."

Jantharl hadn't known anything about Fzoul's acrobatic tongue ere now, but he smiled pleasantly and spread his hands in an oh-so-worldly, expressive shrug. "I *am* a bard." He lifted his voice in the lazy refrain, "Time's fun when you're having flies," then paused expectantly.

The fat minstrel clapped his hands with glee and happily supplied the next line: "It's not easy, being green and terrifying, when those humans, all the monsters they're frying, but I've got my eyes, and—"

Thankfully this off-key masterpiece was interrupted with a sudden rain of wet, spattering brown missiles that splashed all over the mustering yard, endowing it with the unmistakable smell known across the Realms as "the stench of the jakes."

The real bombardment had begun.

Chapter 3
The Cowardly Minotaur

"If I wanted to be drenched in dung, I could have just stayed home on the farm, all those years ago," Jantharl said bitterly, crouching in the lee of the rapidly browning statue with Melgor. "We had heaps of the stuff. Not to mention pits full of it. It was my job to move the heaps into the pits, and then empty the pits onto the fields, shovel-full after shovel-full."

"Well, if you'd had a Thayan cattlepult . . ." Melgor offered brightly.

"My spreading would have been *this* accurate. Uh-huh." The Brightsash Bard surveyed the Great Mustering Yard of Thesk sourly. It already looked more like a freshly turned field than a cobbled courtyard, and it was getting browner—and more pungent—with each passing breath. The splattering of dung was louder than the rain, now.

Amid all the heavily splashing wetness came a heavier, splintering crash. Jantharl and Melgor peered around.

"Ah," the minstrel explained. "Broadsheet scribe." He took one look at the lolling neck of the limp figure and winced. The dead man was strapped to a shattered, improvised cage of timbers to which had been lashed an untidy array of bulging—and now mostly ruptured—cotton sacks. The cage had landed, all too hard, atop the land shark ere skidding across much of the courtyard. "Too little padding, or too strong a catapult. Pity."

"Broadsheet scribe?" Jantharl peered incredulously through the rain at the freshly dead man. "A Thayan prisoner, you mean, sent as a threat? To warn folk they'd best not spread word of the siege? Have the Thayans never heard of rumors? Caravans carrying news far and fast and increasingly lurid? Or is that aimed at us?"

"Oh, no, yon poor fool's no prisoner. He's a customer."

"Hey?"

"He paid them to get, ah, delivered here. There'll be more landing over the next few days . . . among less pleasant things."

As if the unseen Thayans had been awaiting that cue, the slings-hits resumed, adorning the unfortunate scribe and his padded cage with wet, brown splodges. *Lots* of wet splodges.

"Thesk, land of merchants," Melgor explained, "has been persuaded by Sembia—land of richer merchants—to forbid broadsheet scribes from observing the fray. Most folk across the Realms would think this whole annual siege crazed-wits foolery. Our merchant councils know that, and quite rightly think it would make Thesk look bad. So . . ."

"So they're trying to hush it up, because that will make them look *so* much less foolish," Jantharl said sarcastically. "Aye, that'll work."

"Well, *they* think it does," rasped a new voice. "Not surprising, really. Rulers everywhere believe what they want to believe. After all, their lackeys spend a lot of time telling them what they want to hear."

The speaker was very near, and somehow *below* Jantharl, even though he crouched low on the wet cobbles, in the protective lee of the statue. He blinked down, seeking the source. Then stared hard, and blinked again.

Only to find himself still looking at the same thing he'd beheld before. A small, upright purple and blue creature with huge, sad, imploring eyes. It looked like a lizard in some places and like a plump bird in others.

"Aye, I'm beautiful. And aye, I'm more than used to folk staring. Tired of it, even," the bird-thing told Jantharl sourly. "I'm a wizard's familiar, so offer me no violence. His spells are . . . rather nasty, if you're facing him in battle."

Jantharl looked around. It was raining dung all over the courtyard again. "Where . . . where did you come from?"

"I appeared. By magic. Wizard, remember?"

"This is Floonq," Melgor said helpfully, waving at the bird-thing. "He came out of the back of the statue right beside you. There's a concealed hatch about a hand's length square where one of the stones turns on hinges, like a door. Right by your left elbow."

Jantharl sighed. "Any other interesting local features close to me you've, ah, forgotten to tell me about?"

"No."

Jantharl gave him a long, steady look. Then he dropped his gaze to the familiar again. "Well met, Floonq. Might I know the name of your wizard?"

"Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests. He's a minotaur, and a mite shy. I talk for the both of us."

"You *think* for the both of you," Melgor commented dryly—which earned him a long, steady look from Floonq. "And your magic outstrips his."

"Spill not *all* my secrets right off to a new acquaintance, thank you very much, *friend* minstrel," the familiar snapped.

"If it isn't impertinent to ask, what manner of creature are you?" Jantharl asked Floonq.

"I'm an urhult. Now you know quite enough about me; have you any lore of comparable value to yield in return?"

Jantharl spread his hands. "I know not, being unaware of your interests. However, I've traveled the Realms extensively, and kept my eyes open on my journeys. Ask."

"Why are you here?"

"I had to stop somewhere on this particular journey. And behold, when I saw a need, there Fort Thesk was, on the map and indeed rising up, tall and real and rather unprepossessing, ahead of my tired mount. So here I am. I know nothing about this castle other than what Melgor has told me."

The urhult sniffed. "Then you know nothing at all accurate about it." It cocked its head to give Jantharl a rather beady glare. "Can you keep a secret?"

Jantharl grinned. "I'm a bard. Which means not at all. Not for longer than a breath or two, if I can put said secret into a song. Why? Have you a secret that's halfway interesting?"

Floonq's eyes twinkled. "Let the judgment be yours, Saer Bard. My secret is this: The contents of every last granary inside the walls of Thaelfortress have been poisoned, so only preserves and the cattle penned nigh the mountainside are safe to butcher and eat. The deaths started this morning."

"Poisoned?" Jantharl tried vainly to remember if he'd eaten anything baked since his arrival. "Who, and why?"

"The Thayans. They decided to make things more thorough this year, I guess."

Jantharl found himself sighing again. A bard's luck seemed to be one thing in song and legend and quite another in real life.

Another splintering crash heralded the arrival of a second caged broadsheet scribe. This one landed upside down against the wall of a building, spattering it with red. Seeing that, the urhult and the two men behind the statue didn't bother to look for a living passenger to help.

"Come," Floonq commanded. "They'll stop the dung barrage long enough for him to run for shelter—if he could still run anywhere. We'll run for him."

He set off across the sticky, reeking courtyard in the direction of Fzoul's Tongue. Jantharl and Melgor hastened after him.

"Where are we headed?" Jantharl asked.

"The Cursing Priestess. A tavern."

"Of sorts," Melgor commented.

Jantharl was treated to the interesting spectacle of an urhult shrugging.

They slipped and skidded into the Tongue. There the ground was sheltered by overhanging balconies and even a few buildings that joined together over the street. Once inside, he dared to ask, "So if you dwell here and know all about these sieges, why'd you venture out into the heart of a dung bombardment? Are we that interesting?"

"Not 'we,' outlander. You."

"Me? Why? You couldn't have known I was a bard until we talked."

"Oh? You think yourself a man of mystery, striding Thesk unnoticed and unremarked? Think again, Jantharl Harlenduth."

Jantharl blinked. "You know my . . ."

"Evidently." The urhult waddled along the Tongue at a brisk pace.

"So why am I so interesting?"

"Not particularly. Interesting, that is. You are, however, potentially very useful. If we can keep you alive, that is."

"Well, that's good to know. I have some interest in staying alive, myself." Jantharl waited, but the urhult just kept lurching down the street. He swallowed a sigh and asked instead, "Useful how?"

"You can take something out of Thaelfortress for us. Before Tathtauraunt finds it."

Jantharl didn't bother quelling his sigh this time. "What's the something, and who is Tathtauraunt?"

"I'm not discussing the something out here in the open street. Or Tathtauraunt, for that matter."

Jantharl looked up and down the empty street. Ahead, it curved and rose into unseen distances amid the drizzle and eddying fog. Behind them there was the faint roar of the resumed bombardment.

"Very well," he told the urhult. "Properly placed prudence is always a good thing. So I'll learn about these things when and where?"

"Tavern. If Tammaszar is willing."

"Very well—" Jantharl broke off abruptly as the urhult erupted off the cobbles in a loud, wet flurry of untidy flapping. It rose in a spiral that brought it under Jantharl's nose just long enough to favor him with a glare and a warning hiss.

Then the urhult flew in an ungainly arc over a hanging shop sign, only to plummet like a

stone—talons out—and land hard on the head of a masked man who'd just peered out from behind the shutters of a window. The urhult kept flapping as it clawed, dragging the mask askew and then down over the face of the suddenly struggling man. Floonq threw back its ugly head and let out a high, shrill, ululating cry, then sprang aloft again, flapping in real haste.

The ball of purple flames that burst into being right in front of the masked man enveloped his head, scorched the shutters, and almost singed the hastening urhult's tail.

Then it was gone, as quickly as it had come, leaving behind a slumping corpse with a blackened skull for a head.

The urhult fluttered back down to the cobbles and resumed leading Jantharl and Meglor. The look it cast back up at them was smug.

"Will I learn about that, too?" Jantharl asked, managing to sound a trifle calmer than he felt.

The urhult nodded just as they reached a five-way street moot. The urhult marched right up to the door of a wedge-shaped building that filled one angle of the intersection. The door had an angry, open-mouthed woman's face carved in wood over it and a collar proclaiming it "The Cursing Priestess: A Superior Quaffing Establishment."

Jantharl let that claim pass without comment and allowed himself to follow the urhult into a dark, shabby alehouse. The Cursing Priestess was a maze of worn flagstones, dark booths, pillars, and low-voiced murmurings, every plank and cranny of which reeked of stale, long-ago-spilled beer.

The alehouse's half-orc peacekeeper, sporting a breastplate that bristled with the projecting handles of a dozen or so cudgels, loomed up out of the gloom. He took one look at the urhult and beckoned Jantharl and Melgor down a dimly lit passage. Halfway down it, he flung wide a narrow door for them that led off to one side. Then he strode off along the rest of the main passage without stopping, to disappear behind a distant curtain.

Beyond the door was a dimly lit room in which sat a minotaur, dressed in a rich red robe. The minotaur regarded them cautiously from behind a glowing crystal ball set in a frame atop a polished table.

Floong bounded up onto the table and glared into the minotaur's deep brown eyes.

"Stop cowering," Floonq hissed at him. Then it turned and snapped at Melgor, "Close the door and swing the bolt down."

When that had been done, the urhult drew itself up and announced proudly, "Gentlesaers, I present to you: Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests."

The crystal ball flashed blinding bright.

Chapter 4
The Book Many Seek

Jantharl had been expecting that particular mage's trick, and had squeezed his eyes almost shut just before the crystal sphere flared. His hand darted to the dagger at his belt in case the flash was buying time for an attack.

Yet through his lashes, he could see the minotaur wasn't working magic. Rather, he was blushing and cowering in his chair.

"Those were your purple flames out there, aye?" Melgor asked quietly. When the great horned head nodded, the minstrel added, "So who was he?"

"A Warlock Knight of Vaasa," Floonq replied crisply. "They're after the something."

Jantharl opened his eyes. "Well met, Saer Tammaszar," he greeted the minotaur pleasantly. "So are you going to tell us just what this 'something' is? Now, perhaps?"

"I hadn't heard," the urhult snapped, "that bards were so impatient."

"We leave out such little human touches," Jantharl snapped back. "So as to make our tales and ballads so much less believable."

He and Floonq glared at each other for the space of a long, silent breath ere the urhult looked away and said sourly, "The 'something' is a book." It turned to the minotaur mage, who swiftly waved at it to continue.

The urhult turned back to the bard and the minstrel and sighed.

In unison with Jantharl, as it turned out. Floonq's eyes flashed with fresh irritation.

"I am beginning to reconsider the wisdom . . ." it began, making those words a weapon.

"And so you begin to grow wiser," Jantharl interrupted smoothly. He smiled. "Consider me a fool—and you a larger one for contacting me—and speak plainly. Unless you think the Thayans will delay their siege indefinitely for us to discuss matters at leisure."

It seemed the Thayans were either eavesdropping—even though the faint singing sound of a warding spell emanated from the crystal—or were very good at anticipating cues and meeting them.

Before the urhult could frame the sharp reply its angry face heralded, there was a loud, splintering crash from nearby. That crash was followed by the slow, rumbling groan of something heavy and wooden tearing apart and slowly toppling . . . resulting in a deeper, greater crash that shook the tavern.

"They've run out of dung?" Jantharl asked mildly, raising his eyebrows.

Melgor coughed. "For now. And so, the hail of stone begins. Having used up most of the easily harvested boulders hereabouts, the Thayans have taken to bringing wagonloads of broken rock with them. We had a local sage who once explained to me why they do what they do, but two sieges ago he got fatally . . . boulder."

There came a fainter, more distant crash, then one still farther off.

"Very well," Floonq said crisply. "Plain, swift speech. My master—Tammaszar, here—possesses a book we need removed from Thesk. As a widely

traveled wayfarer, you, Saer Harlenduth, are an ideal conveyor of the book out of the castle. Unless you display it openly or otherwise attract attention to it by your behavior, you won't soon be suspected of carrying it. Hopefully you will be able to, ah, dispose of it before being chased, and so pretend innocence of it."

"Dispose of it? Why not just burn it in the nearest grate?"

"Ah, not *that* sort of disposal. I should have said take it to one of several suitable individuals—that we'll name *if* you accept the task—and give it into their keeping."

"So what is this book? And who's Tathtauraunt, and why mustn't he or she—or it, I suppose—find it?"

Floonq looked meaningfully at its master, who nodded and hastily cast another warding spell. This one made the crystal's radiance turn a delicate mauve and darkened the room around them, making it suddenly seem more a cavern or a cellar than a tavern's back room.

"The book is, as you may have guessed, magical. It's called *Lanthroanra's Unfolding Lament*, after she who created it. That's her statue you hid behind, out in the mustering yard. Or rather, that *was* her. Turned to stone. Whenever her book is read, her lips—stone or not—move soundlessly to shape the words being read. Then they move again, when the foretold events actually occur. It's said her mind empowers the book, causing the prophecies to appear within it."

"So it doesn't always have the same words in it?"

"Oh, no. It tells whoever reads it what's going to befall the next day—cryptically and partially, of course—"

"Of *course*," Jantharl and Melgor agreed in perfect cynical unison.

Floonq looked hurt, but resumed speaking. "And when words in it are read, they disappear. Oh, and it must be read from back to front."

The bard and the minstrel didn't bother to repeat their chorus. They merely looked at the urhult meaningfully.

"I didn't make the book," the familiar snapped. "I'm just trying to get it out of Thaelfortress before it dooms us all."

"Of *course* you are," Jantharl agreed. "And how exactly is this book going to doom us all?"

"Well, if it fell into the wrong hands, it—"

"And which hands would those be?" Melgor fired his question with a grin and a wink to Jantharl.

Floonq snarled, "Anyone unscrupulous enough to make use of the book's foretelling to work great evil in the world. Like the besieging Thayans, for example. Or Tathtauraunt."

Jantharl seldom rolled his eyes, but he felt the need to do so now, and he succumbed to it. "The Thayans besiege this castle annually to get a *book*? Forgive me, but why don't they just send some Red Wizards in, suitably disguised, and take it? Or get to Candlekeep or some other place that has a decent library? Surely some sage has seen this book and written exhaustively about it?"

The familiar let out a gusty sigh. "I told you this wouldn't be easy," it said to the minotaur.

"Nothing worthwhile in life is," Jantharl commented tartly. "Would this book be why broadsheet scribes are getting themselves killed being catapulted into the castle?"

"Of course," Floonq replied. "Its foretelling abilities make it a treasure beyond price for them. And before you ask me why they don't just walk into Thaelfortress some other time to try to track down the book, be aware that their masters are just as skeptical as the Thayans about the *Lament*. The broadsheet scribes' masters only send them to cover the siege, hoping for bloodthirsty accounts of evil undead Thayans ravaging innocent Theskians."

"So if the Thayans are skeptical . . ." Melgor began, but the familiar interrupted him.

"The Red Wizards don't believe the book is useful for foretelling. However, if it exists and is magical, they want it so as to keep anyone else from having it. Most of them think it's a mere fanciful fireside tale, but standing in the Thayan army outside our walls right now are a few descendants of Lanthroanra. Those descendants keep talking and talking about the book in hopes that the Red Wizards will seize it and be impressed enough to want to harness Lanthroanra's magical skills, and so unpetrify her."

"Have they thought about how much of a Thayan slave an unpetrified Lanthroanra would be?" Jantharl asked.

The urhult shrugged. "If they have, they've not spoken of it. Perhaps they have plans, or know something about Lanthroanra's magical might that we don't."

Jantharl rolled his eyes again. "Very well. Is the book dangerous to hold?"

The minotaur shook his head, but at the bard's searching look merely added, "No."

Jantharl nodded. "So tell me about this Tathtauraunt."

Floonq strode across the table until its face was close to the bard's and said, "I speak seriously, Saer Brightsash Bard, so mock me not. Your life could depend on it. 'Of course.' "

Jantharl smiled thinly and nodded.

Satisfied, the familiar added, "Behold in your mind's eye a gigantic beholder that has only four eyestalks—but each one ends in a beholder the size of most eye tyrants. And each of *these* beholders is in possession of all the usual eyes. That is Tathtauraunt."

Jantharl nodded. "Well enough, I'm impressed, all ri—"

"There's more. For decades now, some illithids have been imprisoned in the dungeons beneath us. They are chained half-submerged in the castle drains so their efforts must be spent on not drowning. They can never sleep, lest they slip beneath the sewer

water, and they can never stand idle, lest the cold sap the life from them. As our local jest puts it: We have our mind flayers in the gutter."

"Ha ha," Jantharl said politely. "And?"

"And Tathtauraunt seeks to work its way ever closer to these mind flayers, to free them. If it succeeds, it may well gain a small but formidable army to do its bidding."

"And how is a gigantic beholder—or a gigantic anything—going to work its way close to these mind flayers?" Jantharl asked. "If it tries to blast its way in, won't it be noticed? Causing, if Thaelfortress lacks good means of fighting it, a general stampede to flee fast and far across the Realms?"

"You think keenly, Saer Bard."

"I state the blood-drenched *obvious*, Saer Urhult, but let that pass. I'm waiting for you to tell me there's yet more."

"There is. The Impilturans have heard of the book. It's why they're here as well. The knights, that is, that have come these last two sieges in place of the usual soldiers in need of training. They're looking for it."

"So if they see me sauntering along the Tongue with the book under my arm . . ."

"It will be . . . unfortunate."

"I begin to grasp why you went out in a rain of dung to fetch the only men foolish enough to be out in it."

"You do indeed," the urhult said in a dry voice as it strode back and forth across the table. "So . . . are you with us?"

Jantharl sighed heavily, rolled his eyes—and then grinned and shrugged. "Sure. Why not? I've always wanted to do something as crazed as the things I sing about."

Chapter 5
First Blood

Melgor applauded briefly—and when the familiar glared at him, fired right back, "I *do* hope recruiting a passing bard wasn't your first and only plan, Floonq."

"It wasn't," the urhult snapped. "I also tried to create false books that display random writings borrowed from existing texts to use as distractions for the foes of Thesk. And I failed. I considered myself a minor master of magic . . . but crafting lasting items that do more than blast things is, it seems, beyond me." Floonq strode forward and looked at the minstrel and then at the bard. "Neither of you saers would happen to be an arch-crafter of magic items, would you?"

Two heads were shaken.

"If I was," Melgor added, "do you think I'd be a minstrel in this windswept castle, scratching out a living making and singing courting songs for tongue-tied suitors? Or writing and performing trumped-up ballads of the exploits of dearly departed family matriarchs and patriarchs? Or trying to amuse drunken Impilturans for a few coppers and whatever ale the tankards they hurl at me still hold?"

The urhult shrugged. "Ask me no questions of that sort. Most of the careers and pastimes of humans seem crazed to me."

"First blood!" Jantharl said approvingly. "Ouch, and so forth." He looked at the minotaur. "So if I'm going to get myself killed taking your book elsewhere, I'd like to know more about you. So I can work on a new ballad as I'm running, fighting, and dying, you understand. So, Tammaszar, ye of the Ten Invoked Tempests . . . what were those tempests, and why did you invoke them? Or did someone else do the invoking, and you just did the surviving, like a warrior who lists the battles he endured?"

The minotaur blushed, looked away, and said softly, "Beware, Saer Harlenduth. I'm known to be an outrageous liar who spins tales about spectacular adventures I really haven't had."

Jantharl chuckled. "Ho, Tammaszar! *Bard*, here." He tapped his own chest. Then he hooked his thumb in the direction of Melgor. "Minstrel. Lie away."

"No," Melgor said suddenly, as there were more distant crashes outside. "Truth. We've time only for truth, now. Jantharl, you should know that the ten tempests were Tammaszar's mother's temper tantrums, brought on down the years by the things he said. Or rather, the things he admitted. Tamm is an utter, flat-out coward who's rather proud of being so because he's survived when most of the mages he trained with—or under—have died because they tended toward pride, not fear. Being a minotaur, he actually likes to call himself a 'cow-ard.' "

Jantharl winced. "Sure he doesn't secretly want to be a minstrel?"

The fat minstrel's reply was a withering look, and Jantharl hastily added, "Sorry, I meant to say 'bard-in-training.' "

Melgor grinned. "Got you. Now, Tamm here really isn't still alive because he's been so effectively cowardly. He's still alive because Floonq sees so keenly and is so good at hauling him out of trouble. Getting rid of the book is his latest, ah, lessening of local minotaur endangerment scheme."

"Well put," the urhult agreed. "Keep going; we're covering a lot here, swiftly, as the bard in the room seems slower to make smart comments when you're talking."

Jantharl dusted off his best withering look and presented it to the familiar. Who managed a rude gesture that its physique had implied it couldn't produce.

"Tamm here has the book. But he's afraid to read it. Thaelfortress is too small a place to keep the book's owner a secret for long. So, Floonq made it known that Tamm has it—and that he will use its awesome powers, which he, ahem, rather embroidered—against anyone who attacks him. Leave him and the book

alone, and you will be safe from both him and it. Menace him . . . and Thaelfortress will become your death trap."

Jantharl gave the familiar a hard look. "So it *is* all your fault. How do we know you aren't a Thayan agent? Or just trying to get as many humans killed as you can, so the urhults can found a realm of their own here?"

Floonq looked more incredulous than outraged. "*Here?* Bard, who in their right mind would want to found a realm here? Right on the doorstep of a relentlessly rapacious realm of crazed wizards and their endless marauding undead armies? I know you're a bard, but use your *head*!"

Jantharl raised a hand. "Fair enough. I withdraw my query. Forgive me, but I'm suspicious by nature, and"—he swung his gaze back to the minotaur—"I *know* I've seen you before. Where, and doing what?"

"Just about anywhere in the Realms, perhaps," the mage behind the table replied. "I make maps for Realms Revealed Trading."

" 'The first place to go when you want to know where to go,' " Jantharl murmured the trading company's motto aloud. "*That's* it. Somewhere along the Shining Sea coast, it was . . ."

"I was born here. Really. Horns and all. The members of my family have been launderers in the castle for three generations. All save for my brother Helglan, who is a bit of a battle hero; the Wondrous Strange Tales Society's thinking of expelling him. All my kin left to buy new wash vats in Telflamm a tenday back. They couldn't get back in now if they wanted to." The minotaur's stomach rumbled loudly. "And as I don't fancy eating beef, I'm starving."

Jantharl fumbled in his belt pouch, found the end of a trail sausage he kept there, and tossed it across the table. "Here. Hog meat. Rather peppery, and dry as a ruler's wit, but good."

Tammaszar reached for it gratefully. "Thanks!"

" 'Ware!" his familiar snapped. "It could be poisoned!"

The minotaur sighed. "I appreciate your concern, Floonq, but in life, you have to trust *some*one."

"Why?"

Whatever reply Tammaszar might have made to the urhult's snapped question was lost and forgotten in the sudden crash, roar, and rumble of something very hard and heavy smashing into—and then through—the tavern roof. The room shook, dust rained down from the ceiling, and the door rattled against its bolt.

Then the building stopped quivering—which seemed to be the cue for an eruption of shrieks and shouted prayers.

"Open the door," Floonq ordered. "Cautiously, mind. Part of the ceiling could be leaning against it."

Melgor and Jantharl worked the bolt and the door together and peered out in cautious unison. Nothing leaned against the door, but part of the passage's ceiling had fallen, some distant lanterns had gone out, and the darkened tavern was in an uproar.

"Only the Beagle of Competence can save us now!" a man a few rooms away was bawling. "He must bark up the wrong tree!"

Jantharl looked at Melgor, and Melgor looked at Jantharl.

Then, with one accord, they closed and re-bolted the door.

"One can't invent such madness for ballads," the bard said woefully.

"And use it without being laughed at," the minstrel agreed.

They turned back to the room in time to hear the ceiling above groan horribly—and to see the cause.

The tavern had been struck by a coach-sized boulder, doubtless hurled by a siege engine. It had plunged through the roof and the attic beneath—and then through the room below that—to protrude between straining ceiling beams into their chamber.

Tammaszar and Floonq hastily relocated in the direction of the door as the jagged surface of the stone settled closer and closer to the tabletop.

Jantharl peered at it. "Is that . . . writing?"

"It is," the urhult confirmed, pushing past him. "It says: 'If you can read this, you're too close.' " It glared up at Melgor. "So open the door."

The minstrel obliged.

As they all hastened out, Jantharl commented, "Nice to know one of the Thayans has a sense of humor."

"Oh, I've met that particular Thayan," the urhult snapped. "He doesn't just scratch those words on *boulders*."

"Pray pardon, gentlesaers! Pray pardon!"

The voice hailing them from the passage, and approaching rapidly, was young, male, and excited. Jantharl raised his eyebrows—and drew his dagger.

So did Melgor. The minstrel proved to have *two* daggers easily to hand.

"We're ready now," the urhult announced grimly into the darkness. "You can attack."

"Uh, sorry?"

A lantern was hastily unshuttered and raised to shine on its holder's empty free hand and eager young face.

"I come in peace!" he said hastily. "And unarmed! See?"

"That's nice," the urhult replied, "but we're rather busy right now, and—"

The young man with the lantern looked down and saw who—or what—was answering him. His mouth fell open, and his eyes bulged with astonishment and delight. "Ooooh! Who are *you*?"

"Floonq," the urhult replied sourly. "And who are you?"

"Aerad Chuhyuk, of Manycastle News! Here to get stories of the siege!"

"Well, uh, we're rather busy right now," Melgor told the young man, "and—"

Aerad Chuhyuk waved a dismissive hand and tendered them a wide, bright smile. "Oh, this won't take more than a breath, truly!"

A sudden, teeth-jarring crash resounded from the room behind Jantharl. The boards under their feet groaned and then rippled like a wave crashing on a beach, dust rolled out around them, and the walls creaked and shivered.

All as a prelude to another, greater *kerrraaAASH*.

The boulder was now one floor closer to the cellar.

Chapter 6
Down into the Underruns

In the nigh-deafening tumult, the urhult calmly swept the young man's feet out from under him.

The lantern shattered and went out as it clanged on the heaving floor—and Floonq efficiently bounced Aerad Chuhyuk's head off the groaning boards beside his broken lantern.

The young scribe still smiled, but now he smiled at nothing. Struck senseless.

"Broadsheet scribes!" the urhult snarled, dropping the unconscious scribe and bustling off down the passage. "Dirty spies, all of them! *Come!*"

"Come where, exactly?" Jantharl inquired, as they hastened along the passage to the front taproom—and what sounded like the pitched battle raging there.

There were crashes and bangs, as if pots and pans were falling or being used as weapons, and the snapping and tearing of wood—and suddenly the passage was full of flapping wings, bird dung, feathers, and excited cooing. Jantharl struck out with one arm, using the pommel of his dagger rather than the blade, and hit at least two birds solidly. "What by the Nine Blazing Hells—?"

"Pigeons," Floonq explained. "Broadsheet scribes send their reports out of besieged castles by pigeon. Most end up in someone's stewpot. Someone must have broken yon young idiot's cage of pigeons."

"How do the pigeons find whoever's waiting for the reports?"

"Most don't. So the broadsheets end up full of whatever nonsense the printers feel like making up. Worry not; it's how sages' histories have been written for centuries."

"I'm not reassured," Jantharl commented.

"You shouldn't be," the familiar told him, scuttling off down the passage. "After all, the alternative is you taletellers."

"Well, *this* maligned taleteller hasn't failed to notice you haven't answered his question," Jantharl snarled. "Where are we going?"

"Elsewhere," the urhult replied. "Fast."

As they ducked cautiously along the passage toward light—and, by the din, toward general mayhem as well—more boulders crashed down out of the sky, crushing or bouncing off nearby roofs. With a sickening groan, a small building toppled over into ruin, filling the street outside the tavern with wreckage.

Back down the Tongue, a rooftop cistern crashed to the cobbles with a deafening clatter like a wagonload of spilled shields. Somewhere rather nearer, someone shrieked his throat raw as he fell from an unseen height down, down to a sickeningly wet and abrupt silence.

That silence was immediately broken by several distant crashes, and another long, noisy building collapse.

The siege was raging.

"*Dung*," the urhult cursed, skidding to a sudden stop. The front of the tavern was gone. In its place was a flood of building stones and jagged timbers. The toppled building had spilled right through The Cursing Priestess.

"We'll have to go this way," Floonq said, abruptly ducking to the right. Jantharl made a grab for it, but missed.

"*Will* you slow down and answer my question?" he barked—but the familiar had slipped through a dark doorway, and the bard found himself talking to empty air.

Behind him, the minotaur chuckled. "I'm afraid he's always like that."

"It's not a wise career style," Jantharl replied heavily. "Not when I've got my dagger out."

At that moment, a distant *boom* split the air. He froze, looked vainly back in the direction of the noise, and snapped, "That was a bombard!"

"Oh, aye," Melgor agreed. "The Thayans have several. From Lantan, manned by the crews who made them—who are all utterly deaf, I'm told."

"That's no surprise," Jantharl replied, as they advanced cautiously through the doorway Floonq had taken, his daggers out and ready.

It led through three dust- and rubble-filled rooms, the last of which opened—or rather, had collapsed—into a street. A street filled with heaped stones and bricks that had until recently been the walls of buildings. It was decorated with wet smears and mangled arms and legs that didn't look as if their owners would ever need them again.

"Every year," Tammaszar said gloomily, "the Thayans acquire 'volunteers' on their march through Thesk to our walls."

Jantharl looked at the carnage and winced. "And their volunteer service consists of weighing down catapults?"

He peered more closely at one agonized, staring face, and frowned in disbelief. "A *kender*?"

The minotaur and Melgor moved to where they could see the corpse he referenced. Their faces acquired a weary look of recognition at the same moment.

"*Him*," was all Tammaszar said.

The minstrel was a bit more eloquent. "That one was after the book. He wanted to destroy it. Spiritual

reasons, or so he said. Sinful to ruin the fun of life with foreknowledge, however limited."

"And he ended up like this," Jantharl murmured. "A kender surprise." He peered around. "Where *is* that urhult?"

"Here," a familiar voice snapped, from under their feet. "While you were all sightseeing, I found us a way down into the Underruns."

"The way-tunnels," Melgor explained. "They criss-cross under the oldest part of the castle. They were meant to provide cover in winter, in the worst rainstorms, and in times of siege."

"Well, at least it isn't winter yet," Jantharl observed sarcastically. He obediently ducked his head and followed the urhult through an opening half-hidden under a leaning wall, down into darkness. "So where are we headed?"

"Forward," Floonq answered helpfully.

Jantharl took a firm grip on his patience. "Perhaps," he suggested pleasantly, "you could be a bit more specific."

"Deeper."

Before Jantharl could snarl a suitable reply to that, more boulders hurtled out of the sky to crash down somewhere close by. A hole abruptly opened in the darkness overhead to admit daylight, a little rain . . . and a boulder. This one had a rude verse on it.

"There was a young elf on the moor," Jantharl read aloud. "A codpiece of shrinking he found . . ."

Then he shrugged and trudged on past, not caring if he ever learned the rest. There was a lewd drawing scribbled on the other side of the boulder.

"Huh," Melgor commented, scrambling to follow as the hole overhead widened and a trickle of rubble tumbled in. "Orthel will be pleased."

"Who," Jantharl asked, as they all went deeper, leaving the daylight behind, "is Orthel?"

"A scribe who's made it his life's work to set down everything drawn or written on one of these siege stones in a book. *Words from the Heavens*, he's thinking of calling it. He's likely out right now, scribbling down everything he can find."

"As long as he isn't too eager to get a smash hit," the bard said dryly, "he—"

"*Deeper!*" the urhult snarled.

"How close are we to the castle dungeons?" Jantharl asked suddenly, turning to Melgor. "I mistrust our guide."

The minstrel blinked. "Well, they're much deeper than we are now, and most of them are *that* way, well east of us. Er, I think."

"You 'think'?"

"The old dungeons are well known, but you know how secretive war captains can be. The newer diggings are . . . not public knowledge. Then there're the sappers."

"The sappers?"

"The Thayans have a team of gnomes digging for them, siege after siege. They work fast—but have a horrible sense of direction. They double back on their own delving often, going every which way. But they have broken through into the dungeons many times. The breaches were mended by collapsing the rooms and tunnels they'd reached, and digging new dungeons. Deeper."

Jantharl frowned. "Sounds like a recipe for bringing all of Thaelfortress crashing down, sooner or later. Are you certain of this, or is this all rumor? I've never heard of gnomes who don't have a sense of direction underground."

"I think it's having the Red Wizards' spells in their heads that does it. They're fighting so hard to be free. Yet that's just my guess. The breaches and their wandering tunnels, though—that's simple truth. I saw both with my own eyes when I was working for the Mages of the Dragon Coast."

"The Mages of–? And who might *they* be?"

"A sinister cabal of Sembian wizards who are trying to keep the Red Wizards busy. Busy away from Sembia, that is. Some say they goaded the Thayans into the first siege here. Others insist they try to get broadsheet scribes to write about this or not write about that, to sway common opinion. They hired me to do some spying, here in the castle. Through someone else, of course. I learned who I'd been working for four summers later, when the man who paid me was murdered and word got around as to why."

"Who'd they want you to spy on? And as they did what?"

"Bard!" Floonq's snarl was menacing. "If you want to stay alive here in this castle much longer, *ask fewer questions*. Now come on."

Jantharl flung himself to the floor and swept his legs around in a swift reaping spin. He was rewarded with a startled cry and flailing that ended in a thump, as the urhult was tripped up. He pounced.

"Floonq," he panted, nose to nose with the familiar he was throttling, "I *like* urhults. I like you. But I don't like being ordered around as if I were a slave, when those orders hurry me deeper and deeper into unknown but quite likely dangerous places. Especially when those orders come from someone who avoids answering my questions. Evasion makes me suspicious. *Rude* evasion makes me suspect hostility. I'm very suspicious right now. And I have a dagger in my hand. Now, do we understand each other?"

The urhult regarded Jantharl unblinkingly—then spat into his eyes.

Or would have, if the bard hadn't expected it. Alertly ducking and turning his head one direction, he slammed the urhult's head hard against the passage floor in the other. The smoking, hissing spittle went over Jantharl's shoulder.

"Who are you working for?" Jantharl snarled at the struggling, squirming creature whose head he had pinned down. Then he and Melgor both remembered that Floonq was the familiar of a mage who was right behind them. Melgor turned in a hurry with his daggers up.

Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests glared down at the urhult, his nostrils flaring and tiny wisps of what looked like lightning darting between his horns. His eyes were two flaring flames.

"Yes, Floonq," he said very softly, "that's a very good question, to which I require an immediate, full, and entirely honest answer. Besides me, *who are you working for?*"

Chapter 7
Too Many Tentacles

"Long . . . story . . ." the urhult snarled from under Jantharl's very firm hand.

"We have time," the minotaur said coldly. "Unfold your tale."

"In front of–? Master! Secrets of Thaelfortress!"

Tammaszar leaned down close to Floonq. "*Unfold your tale.*"

The urhult swallowed. "Right. The Mages of the Dragon Coast. They're selling inferior weapons to both sides in these sieges and spying on the Red Wizards to see who's capable. The most dangerous Thayans, they work to maim or slay, and they let the bumblers live."

"So you work for the Dragon Coasters?"

"No. Others entirely."

"Who?"

"There are others who are desperate to get their hands on . . . other things."

"Floonq," the minotaur said pleasantly, "I get just as irked as the bard here at evasive answers. Speak more plainly."

"The monocle on the rat over the festhall? Belongs to Tathtauraunt. It can see through it, from afar. It spies on everyone passing. It saw me. Sent . . . agents to bargain with me. We made an agreement."

"And what did they offer you, to betray me?" Tammaszar's voice deepened, and the lightning racing between his horns crackled.

"Y-your continued life, master. And mine."

The minotaur froze. Jantharl stirred to speak, but Tammaszar flung up one arm for silence. And got it.

"So what does the Beholder Lord of Thaelfortress want with me?"

"Not you, master. Nor me. Though if we bring it what it wants, the deal is fulfilled. It wants the bard. And the minstrel, just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case the bard says no."

"No to what?"

"I don't know," Floonq replied. "Honestly. I wasn't told."

"That I believe," Jantharl murmured. And he looked over at Tammaszar to find both the minotaur and the minstrel nodding.

"Suppose," Melgor suggested gently, "we go just a little way on, to the cellars under the brewery, and sit down there for a bit more of a talk. Before I go eyeball to eyeball with an eye tyrant, I'd like to know a little bit more. For instance, who else in the castle is an agent of Tathtauraunt?"

The urhult kept silent until its master leaned forward and said, "I heard a question asked of you, *loyal* Floonq."

The familiar squirmed under Jantharl's grasp. "J-just about everyone who winters in Thael, master. Barring a few of the worst dolts. Oh, and you, master! Everyone. Not that most of them know about the others. Tathtauraunt left most of them thinking they–and they alone–have made pact with it."

"Everyone. So the beholder must have long ago established contact with the mind flayers," the minotaur mused. "Tell me, Floonq . . . have the eye tyrant and the tentacle feeders reached agreement?"

"N-no, master. They're still treating with each other. Most of the dealings are settled."

"Where does Pause stand?"

"She serves Tathtauraunt willingly. Ably, too."

"Who is Pause?" Jantharl asked.

"The illithids' jailer, a tiefling who's preg . . . Floonq, who sired the child Pause now carries?"

"Uh, ah, they *say* Tathtauraunt, but I don't see how a beholder can–*uuurkhk!*"

Glistening mauve tentacles erupted from the floor behind the urhult, uncurling from beneath a stone Jantharl would have sworn was old and solidly set. The tentacles wasted no time trying to ensnare or battle the bard–but thrust right into the urhult's mouth, choking it.

Floonq's eyes started to bulge.

Jantharl's dagger was sharp.

He'd never sliced through mind flayer tentacles before, but they didn't prove much firmer than pudding. Not that he tarried to contemplate their texture. There'd be others, if he knew anything about illithids–

There were. The passage was suddenly full of thin, menacingly striding, mauve figures in grandly sweeping black robes and capes. The illithids hissed angrily as their tentacles writhed and curled, their fell eyes glared malevolently–

And then suddenly their arms were flailing in agony. Tammaszar had unleashed some sort of silent and swift spell that made purple flames gout from the illithids' eyes ere it swept them off their feet and tumbled them down the passage.

"What was that?" Melgor asked in awe. Tammaszar swept its familiar up into its arms like a baby and ripped severed mind flayer tentacles from its mouth.

"A mind lightning spell," the minotaur said grimly. "I don't like illithids."

Shaking the urhult gently, it said, "Floonq? Speak to me of that beagle puppy you like to lick when you meet it. The one you say tastes good. The one that always wants to be walked."

The familiar moaned and drooled. "Awawaaa . . ."

Tammaszar sighed heavily, shook Floonq briskly, and announced, "I haven't time for your little act at the moment. Just answer me plainly. The puppy. You

and I both know it's really a malaugrym. Tell me: Is it in league with Tathtauraunt, or a foe, or—"

Another volley of catapulted boulders shook the passage, spilling fresh dust and rubble down around them.

"Foe," Floonq replied, all brisk business. It looked at Jantharl. "Thanks for my life, bard. I owe you."

Jantharl nodded. "I'd like us to be friends, not enemies. Allies, at least."

"You bards do dream, don't you?" the urhult replied grimly. "Allies I can manage, given the present circumstances." It looked up at the widening rift in the passage ceiling. The storm clouds were clearing, and boulders could be seen plunging down out of the sky. "Should we, ah, relocate?"

Floonq's question was directed at its master, but Tammaszar turned to Jantharl.

Who replied, "Just back up into the tavern. We'll find what's left of a room somewhere, make sure we're alone, and talk. Then when we have a cunning plan, we'll know to where we should relocate."

"Well said," the minotaur agreed. "Let's be getting back."

"Master, what's happened to you?"

"I guess I got too angry to be shy. You might want to bear that in mind when contemplating future treacheries, Floonq."

"*Master!* I—"

They stopped in abrupt unison to gape at what came toward them through the heaped rubble of the tavern taproom.

The statue of the dragonborn monk had left her plinth in the mustering yard and lumbered toward them, its steps heavy and ponderous and its eyes staring blankly. "Who am I?" it demanded, its voice deep and echoing.

"Change of plans," Melgor said quickly, plucking at the minotaur's arm. "This way!"

He hurriedly led the way through an underpantry.

"The wine cellar is through there, so there has to be a back stair or delivery hatch or—ah! Here!" He led the way up a steep, curving stair to a closed panel.

Sliding the panel aside, Melgor plunged into a room where a startled ring of robed folk looked up from a chalked design on the floor. An annoyed-looking woman in a gown lay on her back, barefoot, in the middle of the design. Held in the air above her by way of leather restraints was a slumbering, obviously pregnant female tiefling. The four robed worshipers who held the ends of her restraints were chanting something low and insistent.

A chant broke off in confusion as the worshipers all turned to stare at Melgor and his companions.

The minstrel smiled brightly, but rather weakly, and announced, "Oh, I'm very sorry!"

The woman on the floor stared up at Jantharl. "Jan?"

"*Oparlra?* What brought you *here*?"

One of the tallest chanters strode angrily toward them. "You profane against Great Sune! This is a solemn ritual, and—"

"No, it's not," the urhult said irritably.

"Excuse me?"

"It's not a solemn ritual. No ritual of Sune is solemn."

The Sunite priestess drew herself up haughtily. "Oh? And just who—what—are you?"

"A servant of Sune," the urhult said flatly. "So bow down and mind your manners."

From behind Floonq, the minotaur let out a snort that sounded suspiciously like a suppressed chuckle.

"Oparlra?" Jantharl was still too astonished to do more than stammer out questions.

The woman on the floor tried to roll out of the chalked design and rise, but found herself pinned under the sagging tiefling as the Sunites holding her turned to gawk at the four intruders. "Get your Pause off me," she snapped at them, startling them into fresh confusion.

"I take it," Tammaszar said to Jantharl, "you two know each other from, ah, before Thaelfortress."

The bard nodded. "We do, and—"

"Say *nothing*!" Oparlra hissed, rushing up to them the moment she won free. "Nothing at all about me!"

"Ah." Jantharl nodded. "Understood."

"And get me out of here. These Sunites have some odd ideas. I'll need some boots; they took all my clothes."

Jantharl nodded again. "Have you noticed anyone with feet your size?"

"*What?* No, I've been rather *busy*, Jan, being dragged into this ritual! I *told* them I was a consecrate of Sharess, but they say that's—get this!—'close enough'!"

"They dragged you into their ritual unwillingly? Well, then . . ."

Jantharl looked at the boots worn by the priestess angrily arguing with Floonq, and judged them near enough.

Ducking and thrusting an arm around one of her thighs, he boosted the Sunite off the ground in one smooth motion, ignoring her shrieks. Snaring one wildly kicking foot, he tugged the boot off it and tossed it in Oparlra's direction.

"Try it on!" he called, ducking as sharp fingernails raked at his face. Trying to keep his balance under the struggles of the priestess, he staggered back a few steps and turned—only to see the rest of the Sunites charging him.

From mere steps away.

With a curse, he caught hold of the second boot in one hand and heaved the priestess with the other. She hurtled over his head into two of her fellow Sunites, dashing them to the floor. Jantharl fled with the boot.

Behind him, the room went suddenly darker and quieter.

Chapter 8
One Comes, Loudly Heralded, to the Ritual

Ominously darker and quieter—and *right* behind him.

Jantharl skidded to a halt as he twisted around to see why.

"A smidge large, but they'll do," Oparlra announced happily, snatching the second boot from him. Jantharl barely noticed. He was too busy gawking at the smirking minotaur mage, and what Tammaszar had done.

There was suddenly a wall across the room. A wall that hadn't been there a moment before.

They were on one side of it—and the Sunites and the sleeping tiefling were trapped on the other. Jantharl could feel the floor shake as the angry worshipers crashed into the wall, and the subsequent blows as they hammered on it . . . but he couldn't hear them, or anything at all from the far side of the wall.

"Now, that's a handy spell," he told the minotaur, watching an approving Oparlra stamp her feet into her borrowed boots.

Tammaszar grinned. "You might say it's . . . magic. So your lover, or onetime companion, is a priestess of Sharess."

Jantharl blinked. "Did I say that? Guess I didn't have to."

The minotaur nodded. "Do you trust her?"

The bard frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Can we have our bluntly honest talk in front of her?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Good," the minotaur replied, and he looked down at Floonq. "So let us talk."

"I—uh, well . . ."

Tammaszar sighed, stepped back, lowered his horns, and cast a swift spell. His familiar looked alarmed—and then resigned to what was about to happen.

Floonq flopped to the floor like a boneless thing and started to babble.

"The priestess can't stop bobbing her head . . . They say two of Tathtauraunt's eyestalks are in love with each other . . . the monocle is gigantic because size does matter . . . it belongs to the nearsighted beholder . . . A halfling under a curse that makes him a she, then her a him, then back again; the Sunites were going to cure him, but he trusts them not . . . he loves a sheep . . . 'I only have eyes for ewe!' . . . he stole the scroll under the dragonborn statue, to try to break his curse, but the writings weren't magic at all . . . The mop boy at the Magnificent Mansion of Taste Violations quit after an incident with a corset of custard summoning . . ."

"*What?*" Jantharl looked at the minotaur. "What is this?"

". . . the shortage of maids was well noted . . . the fruit carts will have no fruit . . ."

"The spell makes you speak uncontrollably," Tammaszar explained. "Dreams and notions and truth all mixed together. Listen carefully. It doesn't last long, and we'll get only a few useful snatches out of it all."

"When the fruit runs out," Floonq told the ceiling excitedly, "the drow will provide new supplies, up through the dungeons . . . What we still have is spoiled; those who eat it will see wild visions . . . Beware, for someone we thought to be dead yet lives . . . Amole the mighty big-horned barbarian rides his elephant to relieve the siege on Thaelfortress, but afoot he comes barely up to a short man's knee . . . The Thayan commander rides a dragon that's afraid to fly . . . it swallowed a wand of wonder, so its breath is gouts of harmless bubbles . . . but if it spews on you, you're doomed . . . Beware the barbarian who rides a beagle into battle . . . Every third day or so, the book doesn't quite tell the truth . . . In the dungeons is a duck, and under it is the solution to all problems . . . a matched torch lets you lead mobs . . . The alchemist has a homunculus made out of fungus . . . never open his can of wyrms . . . If she gets excited, the priestess will snarl curses and say the most shocking things, and can't stop . . . Beware the weregoat, who works as a nurse; yes, she's a nanny goat, but seven feet tall, and with the voice of the barbarian gods . . . her battle cry is 'You *will* eat your vegetables!' and she is to be feared . . . I have looked in the book, and on its last page I read, 'And I became as hard as stone' . . . The Thayans have assembled a regiment of curators and statue sellers, who will rebuild Thaelfortress after their siege destroys it . . . Tathtauraunt is madly in love with Helglan the black minotaur, who is as ugly as the hind end of a mangled boar, which just proves that beauty—booty?—is in the eye of the beholder . . . which must be how you get pinkeye . . ."

Jantharl looked at Tammaszar. "You think that's possible? The beholder could be in love with your brother?"

The minotaur mage shrugged. "If it can sire a tiefling's child, I don't know what to believe. This could all be Floonq's speculation, remember. Or nightmares."

The familiar's torrent of words slowed, and its stare grew less wild. ". . . the weregoat loves the halfling, but knows not why he's sometimes a he, and sometimes a she . . . The missionaries seek the sacred writings on the holy boulders that come out of the sky at Thaelfortress . . . There will come a goliath, a fearsome warrior who just wants to dance . . . The fork . . . the fork is in . . . the fork is with you . . . I must pull the fork out!"

The urhult sprang up, shouting, "I must pull the fork out! I must! I must! *I must pull the fork out!*"

"You must calm yourself," Tammaszar said, gathering Floonq into a bear hug. "Easy now, Floonq. Easy." The minotaur deftly smothered the urhult to the drowsy edge of unconsciousness, then looked at Melgor and Jantharl. "What did you hear that we should heed?"

The bard and minstrel frowned in unison, then brightened and started to speak. Melgor was a trifle faster.

"There's something hidden under a duck in the dungeons that we have to find. I'm not sure about anything else."

"*I'm* not sure of *anything*," Jantharl said with a sigh. "It all sounded like raving to me."

"*Well said*, saer!"

An unfamiliar voice boomed those words from the entrance to the room, startling them. They turned.

The man framed in the doorway was tall and broad-shouldered—and had no hands. He wore full plate armor—from the stumps where his wrists should have been, to the pointed tips of his boots—and it was shapely, emphasizing his trim waist, curved hips, and muscular chest and thighs. There was a gleaming gorget at his throat, but he was helmless. A lash was strapped stoutly to one forearm and a longsword to the other, and both his breastplate and codpiece were embossed with symbols of the goddess Sune.

"I," he announced grandly, surveying the room with warm, steel-gray eyes, "am here for the ritual. Where is everyone?"

"By 'everyone' you mean Sunites all robed up for worship, I presume?" Oparlra asked.

The armored man's eyes met hers and brightened.

"And who, beauteous lady, are you?"

"Oparlra. A priestess of Sharess."

They all watched a blush suffuse his face. He smiled and asked shyly, "I would be, ah, charmed to better make your acquaintance, lady. Though not . . . as intimately as many of the rituals of your faith prefer, I hasten to assure thee."

Oparlra smiled. "Ah. A virgin in armor. As all paladins of Sune start out. And seeing as your armor is gleaming steel rather than adorned with pink, a status you must still . . . enjoy."

The man in armor winced. "You wound me, lady, when I would fain become your friend—and in time, if you'll have me, more than that."

He looked at the others standing with her and sniffed. "I would be better company, at the very least, than you now keep."

Melgor blinked. "Do minstrels smell or something? Be not so swift to judge, holy knight! Say, now, saer, we know what you are, but how would you be called?"

"I am Elgarr Mandrurjack, a paladin of Sune! And I am on a twofold quest!" At his utterance of that last word, the air filled with a fanfare of unseen trumpets.

"Oh?" Jantharl asked cautiously. "What sort of a twofold quest?"

"I must ensure that a certain book is in the right hands, and I must acquire a certain corset."

The bard quelled his sigh. "Let me venture a guess. A corset of custard summoning?"

"*You've seen it?*"

"No, but I've heard of one. Locally."

"This 'certain book' you speak of," Oparlra put in. "What sort of book is it?"

"One in which writings of the future appear, that must be read back to front," Mandrurjack boomed.

"I own such a book," Tammaszar told the paladin, before Jantharl or Melgor could shush him.

Mandrurjack frowned. "I'm not sure the notion of a minotaur controlling something of such magical power sits easily with me. You are dressed as one who wields magic."

"I'm not sure the notion of a paladin of Sune presuming to judge me sits easily with *me*," Tammaszar replied gravely, "so I suppose we're even."

The armored holy knight stepped forward, his whip and sword rising.

"Bull-man, do you *sport* with me?"

Chapter 9
Talking and Even Some Thinking

Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests stood his ground.

"Sport with you? I'm not even flirting with you. Rather, I'm stating my thoughts plainly. And would in turn like some plain answers from you. By 'the right hands,' do you mean you want to seize the book? Or ensure it passes into the keeping of the church of Sune?"

The paladin blinked. "I've been told I should get my hands on the book, yes, but that was by a young and naïve priestess of the faith. The senior priestesses said that I was to make sure the book did not fall into the wrong hands. Who those wrong hands belonged to was left to me to judge."

"Well, it's a safe bet they won't be *your* hands," the urhult snapped, shifting restlessly in its master's grasp. "What happened to them?"

"Many years ago, I acted rashly. There's a statue in the mustering yard you must be familiar with: the dragonborn monk. Someone placed a garter belt on that statue, and I snatched it off—at the price of my hands. It was an enchanted belt, and the only safe way to remove it, I was informed later, was with my teeth."

"Huh," Oparlra commented. "They always inform you later, don't they?"

"Lady fair, you can inform me later *any* time," Mandrurjack said affectionately.

Floonq winced and made a loud retching sound. That earned him a stern scowl from his master.

Jantharl rolled his eyes. "Even for a paladin, your lines need work," he muttered. "Get on the wrong side of Oparlra, here, and you're apt to need—"

"Pray pardon, saer bard, but tell me true: Which is her wrong side?" the paladin interrupted, looking grave. "I *must* know this, for I will be spending much time with you, henceforth, and must needs avoid giving offense to such a *charming* lady."

"Spending much—?" Melgor blinked. "You will?"

"Oh, yes. I must join your fellowship, so as to prevent the book falling into the wrong hands. Even my own."

"But you don't *have* any hands," the urhult snorted.

"Oh, but I do. My hands live yet—kept supple and moving by the same fell magic that directs them. They run a shop here in Fort Thesk, where dolls are sold."

Melgor frowned. "A *doll* shop? I've never . . . oh. Is this doll about the height of a middling-stature man? And the same wide?"

"It is."

"Ah." Melgor turned to Jantharl. "The shop where the disfigured dead are prepared for burial with refashioned faces, heads, and the like. Darthemran's, on Lendle Street."

"I'm not likely to become a client," the bard replied dryly. "While still alive, at least."

The paladin frowned at them, and then at the minotaur.

"Are you *sure* you're the right and fitting person to possess the book that writes of times just ahead?" he asked Tammaszar.

Who replied solemnly, "I am. Now, haven't you a ritual you need to be getting to?"

The holy knight looked at him, then shot a helpless glance of appeal at Oparlra. He coughed. "Yes," he admitted. "And where is it?"

The minotaur mage waved an arm, and the wall behind him vanished. Robed Sunites fell through suddenly empty air, beating their fists on nothing. They set up a gladsome cry at the sight of the paladin, but his eyes were fixed on the priestess of Sharess.

"Elgarr Mandrurjack, paladin of Sune," he murmured, tapping his breastplate with the arm that was fitted with the lash. "Remember me."

Oparlra blew him a kiss. "Oh, I shall."

He gave her a grave nod and strode into the heart of the Sunites—who immediately clamored, "Smite these cruel ones! They interrupted our holy ritual! They imprisoned us here! They—"

As the paladin started to turn, his face hardening, Tammaszar waved his arms and muttered something, and the wall returned, sealing off the Sunites and their half of the room once more.

"*Thank* you." Oparlra sighed. "I was beginning to fear I was going to have to devote myself to mothering a man with more holiness than wits, and less worldly experience than the nearest milking stool. Who's smitten with me but doesn't know what to do about it."

The minotaur chuckled. "My spell won't last forever. And it'll hold for a very short time indeed if that paladin carries the right sort of divine magic and knows how to use it. Let's get gone."

"Have you noticed," Jantharl said as they headed back down the curving stair into the back rooms of the tavern, "how quiet it's fallen? The bombardment seems to be over."

"For now," Melgor replied, darting cautious glances around the darkened and seemingly deserted tavern. "Which means the Thayans'll be storming the walls. After they get beaten back, about when it's time to prepare evenfeast, they'll start hurling things into the castle again."

"So while this respite lasts, we should go somewhere safer," Oparlra said firmly. "Any thoughts on that?"

"I have one," Floonq piped up. "There's an event that usually takes place in Thaelfortress during the initial assault on the walls that we'll want to keep well clear of: Lord Rustable's Hunt."

"Oh, Watching Gods above," Melgor said slowly. "I clean forgot."

Jantharl got his sigh out of the way as quickly as he could. "And what, pray tell, is Lord Rustable's Hunt?"

"Lord Rorlram Rustable," the minstrel began slowly, "is—"

"Utterly crazed," Floonq said flatly. "A hooting mind prancer. A staring-eyed, raving—"

"Floonq doesn't like eccentric old outlander nobles," Tammaszar explained. "Lord Rustable is a harmless old man with some affectations and a love of hunting. He came here years ago from the Sword Coast. He always holds a hunt inside the castle during the annual Thayan siege. As in, a bunch of wild-armored old nobles on horseback—or *off* horseback; they spend a lot of time falling off—galloping full tilt through Thaelfortress in pursuit of, well, the lord's pet beagle. Not that they ever catch it, mind you. The whole thing is an excuse for drinking and shouting and falling off horses. The priests who heal for hire encourage it, of course. These days, Rustable spends most of his waking hours tied into a chair so he won't slide out of it whenever he falls asleep. In the saddle, he's a different person. Awake, alive—"

"Manic," Floonq added, in precisely the same tone as his master. "And he can't see much beyond the end of his own nose, so when he's out riding, it's not safe to be anywhere on the same street."

Jantharl stuck his head cautiously out of the deserted tavern to peer down all the streets he could see. They were empty of all but rubble, yet he could hear something—a distant, confused din—off to the east. It sounded a lot nearer than the continuous clash, rumble, and thunder to the south that had to be the battle at the castle walls.

"Is that the hunt I'm hearing?"

"Likely. So we'll want to head somewhere else."

"The Magnificent Mansion of Taste Violations?" Tammaszar suggested with a grin. "It has that enchanted room where things fall up. Could be handy when the boulders start to appear again."

"Can't afford it," Melgor replied. "Besides, I don't want to get anywhere near the troll who works there, ever again. The intellect of the nearest cobblestone, the strength of an angry bull—sorry, Tamm—and

thinks she's a sultry little she-elf." He shuddered. "Truly terrifying."

"There's a tale here, I can tell," Jantharl teased.

"Yes, and you're not going to hear it, so leave off. We should be talking of ways to get you safely out of the castle with the book—and without all Tathtauraunt's agents hard on your heels."

"I'm all ears," the bard murmured.

Oparlra chuckled. "That's not how I remember you!"

"You're not helping!" Jantharl told her. "I—" A deep, barely audible thundering sound caught his ear. Frowning, he ducked his head back outside.

And swiftly drew it back, to stare at everyone in incredulous astonishment.

"There's an *elephant* coming down the street," he announced. "Fast."

"Heh." Floonq scuttled to the door to take his own look. "Amole made it!"

"Through a *siege*?"

"The elephant opens magical ways—no one knows exactly how."

"So it could become my way out? With the book?"

The urhult smiled. "Now you're thinking. So long as the enchantments on the book don't play havoc with the elephant's portal walking, that should work just fine. We may have to persuade Amole, but—"

"*Should* work just fine?"

Floonq coughed. "Well, it's never been tried before, so there's only one way to find out."

Jantharl sighed, then peered outside again. "The elephant is coming down yon street this way—fast. The hunt seems to be coming this way on the same street from *that* direction. Also fast. Charging hard, in fact, both converging forces. Same street."

Melgor chuckled. "I feel a ballad coming on."

"I feel mayhem coming on," Jantharl replied. "Right outside this door, about three breaths from now. We might want to pick our way across the tavern, find another street, and use it to get well away from here, before—"

Floonq looked out the door again, chortled—and was gone, rushing up the street to confront the beagle that loped along at the head of the hunt.

It saw the urhult and abruptly swerved and ducked down a side alley with Floonq in hot pursuit.

Tammaszar pushed past Jantharl to see what was happening.

"So if Floonq heads the hunt off," Jantharl started, casting a quick glance in the other direction to see how close the charging elephant was, "we can swirl our cloaks and head away in another direction, right?"

The minotaur mage shook his horned head and started across the street, following his familiar. "No," he said without turning. "We must chase after Floonq."

"Or . . . what, exactly? How can things get worse than they are right now?"

"The dragons could get loose. And Tathtauraunt could find us. Those're just the first two things on a long, long list . . ."

Whatever else Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests was going to say was lost to Jantharl's ears as the minotaur plunged into the alley.

His jaw dropping open, Jantharl stopped dead in the middle of the street.

"*Dragons?* You have dragons, plural, imprisoned somewhere here?"

It was at about that moment—with Lord Rustable's Hunt bearing down on him from one direction, and a charging elephant with a tiny man in furs and baldrics and an oversized horned helmet charging at him from the other—that it occurred to Jantharl the Brightsash Bard that standing in the middle of this particular Thaelfortress street at this particular moment might be a less than wise career choice.

As the elephant loomed up like a wall of angry thunder, it lowered its head, pointing one long, curved tusk right at his guts.

Jantharl tried to think of something witty to say as he sprang for the safety of the tavern.

And failed.

Chapter 10
What Happens When It All Comes Together

"Jan!" Oparlra shrieked, shooting out one shapely arm to gather him in. They fell back into the tavern together, Melgor springing politely aside to give them room to do so.

Three hard-running young men, sprinting along at the forefront of the hunt, had seen the beagle turn into the alleyway and took the same route when they reached it.

The rest of the hunt had not—and they raced full tilt into the elephant, even as it charged into them. Bodies flew like embers from a hot fire, or were trampled underfoot, screaming. Polearms shattered like dry twigs against weathered purple-gray hide, spells were shouted, and—

The elephant was gone. The short barbarian plunged down through suddenly empty air to slam into the paunch of a startled horseman with a huge white quivering mustache. From which he bounced high, as the horseman retched, then landed on his feet, snarling defiance at everyone.

"They've noticed the tavern," Melgor reported tersely, "and will head here in a breath or two. Snatch some drinkables, and let's get gone! Heading after Tammaszar, I strongly recommend!"

Jantharl and Oparlra obeyed, liberating a large decanter each from behind the deserted bar without examining the contents of either, and sprinting after Melgor. Melgor dashed into the street, his person already bulging with acquired bottles.

Jantharl flung a random handful of coins back over his shoulder by way of payment and found himself skidding in very fresh elephant dung. He caught his balance with Oparlra's aid, then plunged into the alley without looking closely at the pulped slush that had recently been some of the fastest hunt members.

Melgor puffed and sloshed ahead of them, moving fast despite his bulk. They burst out of the alley, ran across a side street, and plunged into the street of soothsayers. Melgor was panting hard but still two strides in the lead.

"Into the sooth!" he cried. "Onwaaaard!"

The three hastened. Wild-eyed—or blindfolded—bearded faces loomed on all sides of them, bobbing or chanting or tossing handfuls of smooth pebbles back and forth from hand to hand. Soothsayings rose in a cloud of crazed words.

"Seek Kendra the druid, she of the sun-bright hair and wits like a dead sapling!"

"Lubrication or lucubration, 'tis all the same!"

"The curse riding the town crier is that he speaks in puns, or not at all."

"The wizard Cox made the monocle over the festhall door, the ring that makes a man a maid and a maid a man, and the corset of custard summoning. Some say the size of the monocle means he's a giant, but others say the size of the corset tells us he's slender and shapely or even a woman. Still others are wise enough to say nothing at all. Me, I'm still undecided."

"Now you know why this was free!"

"He was saved by his enchanted pluterhosen. They inflate when wet, and so saved him from drowning."

"Repent! Repent, and you'll not perish in winter out yonder on the pitted, scarred Lesion Fields!"

"For it is written that the butcher who runs out of meat must take desperate measures!"

"The gods themselves are inspired when a drunken dragon descends to the dungeons—for dun, gin, and dragons is a potent mix!"

"Time lies when you're having fun!"

"Heed ye! That pitchfork was handed down to a farmer from his grandsire, who had it from a traveler—who came across a fork in the road."

"But behold, it was not a pole of dancing, nor yet a lance of kebabing! It was a wooden leg meant for a minotaur! A kender by the name of Shish owned it, and it, the pitchfork of inciting, and the dogapult were a holy trio of relics meant to be wielded in worship together."

"It is written that the kenku monk is easily distracted by shiny things, but, know you, it is not written what *sorts* of shiny things!"

"Beware the kender, for it is in truth a were-minotaur, who comes out on the full mooooon."

Then Melgor ducked into an alley with Jantharl and Oparlra right behind him. Silence fell, as if the babbling soothsayers were a world away.

"Whew!" the minstrel gasped. "I used to trot along there whenever I needed wild ideas for a ballad or a tall tale for the taverns, but too much of that would make anyone's head hurt."

The alley was a short one, bending in a noisome dogleg brimming with old refuse before turning into a wider, brighter street.

Melgor emerged from the dogleg, sprinting with renewed vigor—only to stumble to an abrupt halt, gaping. Jantharl and Oparlra almost ran into him, but managed their own swift stops and astonished stares.

Ahead, Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests and his familiar faced, across sixty feet or so of shattered street, four beholders. Each eye tyrant glittered and shone and—Jantharl peered—yes, trailed a stalk or arm that descended down into holes amid the heaped and tumbled cobbles. Which meant they were like four deadly hand puppets, all part of just one notorious, still-buried giant beholder.

So this must be Tathtauraunt, the gigantic beholder, Jantharl thought. Which meant they were almost certainly doomed.

A curious snarl came from the beholder—a growl that steadily rose into a squeal or wail. Its four visible heads were quivering . . . no, shuddering.

Floonq and its master were backing away. Jantharl decided that was a good idea. So did Melgor and Oparlra, and in the space of a few tense breaths they were all back in the alley, around the corner from the beholder and the churning stretch of broken street under which it hid.

"Tamm," Melgor hissed, "what'd you do?"

"Me? Nothing! Played a target, staring at the beholder with my mouth open, that's all!"

"It looks hurt," Oparlra pointed out. "And why didn't it attack you?"

"You saw it glittered? With that shiny coating all over it? Well, that coating is covering all of its eyes. It tried to use one—and the coating trapped the magic in the eyestalk, so it took effect right there, and blew it to wet spatter stew!" Tammaszar winced at the memory. "The coating is pixie blood and enspelled forge dust and . . . other things. Probably something concocted by our local alchemist, Antrus Dralthair. The blast, when the bladder burst above the beholder, looked like his work."

Oparlra's eyes narrowed. "Dralthair . . . wasn't he working with the Thayans?"

"Oh, yes, both sides hire him. We get him working on nastiness to use on the Thayans, and then the Thayans arrive to besiege the castle and hire him to oversee their barrages. Then they go home, and we hire him to think up more nastiness." The minotaur's grin was just short of bitter. "He's a man of mutable standards, and it's steady work."

"Great words for a tombstone," Jantharl observed. "Let's get gone from here. Unless Floonq is still eager to catch the beagle? Where is it, anyhail?"

"It disappeared down one of the fissures, where the street was all broken up. Down there with the beholder," Floonq replied gloomily. "Or *in* the beholder."

"Where'd the elephant go?" Oparlra asked.

"Halfway across the Realms, if it's lucky," Melgor replied, peering warily in all directions as they came back out into the street of the soothsayers. "They'll soon get hungry here in the castle, you know."

A soothsayer rose, staring at them, and bellowed, "Beware the purple menaces with tentacles, who feed on brains! The beagle is their plaything. They send it around Thaelfortress to entice and lure!"

The bard, the minstrel, the minotaur and his familiar, and Oparlra all exchanged looks.

"For she dwells in a tower, enrapt in beauty and her long, long hair! In love she is, and lets down her golden standards!"

And with that, the soothsayers were all up and clamoring again, shouting their visions and beliefs and corrections of unbridled heresy.

"For time passes differently outside these walls, some days, but not others!"

"Lolth watches and gloats! Truly, the chaos of these sieges is beyond even divine comprehension—but what the Queen of Spiders sees of the blood and tumult that afflicts Fort Thesk, she loves!"

A soothsayer thrust a small purse into Jantharl's hand and hissed, "Use these wisely! Some would fritter these, or hoard them, but you are wise, saer bard, and when the time comes, you will know!"

Jantharl frowned, hefting the small leather bag. It felt like it was full of . . . gems.

"For there were levers around the castle in those days, and whenever they were pulled, the land shifted, and those who attacked became defenders, while those who'd defended now attacked! When they asked Lorthlar of Teflamm why he pulled every lever he saw, the halfling replied that he was a lever-puller born!"

Behold yon figure, on the rooftop! 'Tis Larloch, the Doombringer, come as he comes every year, to watch the death and suffering of the sieges!"

Thrusting the purse he'd been given down his shirt for the nonce, Jantharl looked where the wild-eyed man was pointing and saw a tall, black-robed figure atop a building far down the street. At that moment, the dark watcher turned from gazing out over the distant walls to looking down at the bard—and Jantharl felt a cold regard. He shivered and looked away. When he dared sneak a glance back up, several bellowed dooms and prophecies later, the rooftop was empty.

"This," a soothsayer whispered, close beside his ear, "is what happens when it all starts to come together. The Time of Troubles was nothing compared to this. Believe me."

Jantharl winced. He didn't want to believe any such talk . . . but he was starting to.

May the Watching Gods help us all.

Chapter 11
If a Castle Should Fall

"Come on," said Melgor roughly, tugging at Jantharl's arm to draw him away from the soothsayer. "We'll be getting the missionaries next!"

"The what?"

"Missionaries. Priests of Corellon and Lolth. They pay their way handsomely through the Thayan lines for the privilege of haranguing the besieged folk of the castle. They all hammer on a single door, crying for refuge. Then when it's opened, they start preaching, each priest trying to outshout the other and multiple feet in the door to prevent it being slammed on their noses."

Jantharl shook his head. "During a *siege*? If I answered the door at all, I'd be inclined to slam not the door but their bodies—with something hard and sharp."

"Oh, they're not just priests, to be put off with skillets of boiling water or flung chamber pots. They're barbarians, armed to the proverbial teeth."

"Charming," the bard commented. "Anything else really cheerful about these sieges I should know about?"

"Well, those gnome sappers will come up *somewhere* before much longer."

"Oh, aye. Anything I should know about them?"

"Very narrow tunnels. If humans need to use them, it's get bare and get greased. We usually use hog fat. They're led by a grizzled old gnome who's more scars than flesh. He covers himself with a mask and strapped-on plates of leather and amulets and the gods alone know what all. Goes by the name of Gustrus More."

"Urrgh. Gnome more, friend Melgor! Next you'll be telling me there're vampires and suchlike."

"Well there are, and lots of 'suchlike.' There's only one vampire, but it keeps to the main castle wells. It guards them, actually. It tore apart an assassin paid to poison the wells years back, and commanded the assassin's bits and pieces be sent back to those who sent him as a warning. We did it, too."

"Now *that* I approve of," Jantharl replied, letting himself be steered into another alley. "If more folk did that, there'd be less poisonings—and fewer innocent casualties. Poison shows little judgment in selecting foes."

"That corset of the custards used to belong to that vampire," Floonq commented suddenly. "Quite fetching he looked in it, too." It winked. "Well, to an urhult, anyhail."

It turned to enjoy the looks its comment earned it from Jantharl and the others. Then it added brightly, "There are some who say that assassin botched all his jobs because the sight of blood made the man faint. And that he wasn't very bright. The poison he'd bought for the well poisoning was labeled merely "use me," and not knowing how, he poured it on the flagstones, not into the water. Why, there—"

The familiar stiffened, went silent mid-sentence, and ducked into a crouch.

Just ahead of them, Oparlra stopped suddenly.

"Peril," she murmured over her shoulder. "Tammaszar, be ready."

"For what?" the minotaur asked, joining her.

"See the woman standing in the corner doorway? On the right, about four cross streets up? That's Hurmeldra Straelstone. She's what they call a chaos sorcerer, and she's a long way short of being sane."

"She's also seen us," Tammaszar murmured. "Should we expect trouble?"

"Seeing as she's worked for the Thayans for the last six years, and is still alive and flourishing, the answer to that one is yes. The more she fights, the more she slips into madness. She already has some sort of spell at work—see the shimmering in the air around her?"

"I don't have the spells to shield us all, or even counter her if I don't know what she's cast," the minotaur warned. "We should scatter—sidling casually, not running. If we stand together, we make a tempting target for—"

He blinked. The distant sorcerer was gone from the doorway.

And suddenly standing right in front of them, her arms still folded across her chest and her eyes contemptuous.

"Well met," she purred, almost sneering. "A curious fellowship to meet here in the streets of Fort Thesk. I wonder if you might happen to have what I'm seeking?"

Everyone fell silent and waited. Neither Straelstone nor those facing her said a word until Jantharl sighed and asked aloud, "And what might you be seeking, lady?"

"A ring that makes a maid into a man, and a man into a maid. A corset that summons custards. And a certain book."

Her eyes bored into those of the minotaur, who stared back at her without a word. Tammaszar's eyes might have been two sword points.

"A love of literature is always good," Jantharl drawled. "What's your interest in this 'certain book,' if I may be so bold . . . ?"

The sorcerer laughed lightly. "I have a pen that will write in it, Brightsash Bard."

Jantharl crooked an eyebrow. "You have the advantage of me, lady."

"Ah, but it's gratifying to finally meet a man who knows his limitations. I do indeed. So to avoid unpleasantness, you might want to surrender the book rather than forcing me to do . . . violence."

"To avoid unpleasantness," Floonq snapped, "you might want to refrain from casually uttering threats to folk who outnumber you."

The chaos sorcerer's smile was cold. "As I recall, urhults feel great pain when . . ."

She had lifted her fingers and was almost lazily forming an image in the air when a knife whirled out of the passing air and sliced two of them almost off.

Straelstone shrieked and clutched at her spurting hand. Floonq swarmed up her body and clawed at her throat. She fell back, grabbing at the urhult. She managed to fling it away—just as Tammaszar smiled tightly and unleashed a spell that took her suddenly elsewhere.

"Where—?" Jantharl asked him, staring at the empty cobbles where the menacing woman had stood moments before.

"There's a shrine to Tempus in one of the castle towers," the minotaur replied, watching his familiar rise and dust itself off. "During the sieges, there are always several priests of the Lord of Battles in residence—and a steady stream of worshipers, too. Dominating its sanctuary is a large spiral stair that rises from the main floor to the holy armory. That stair is guarded by several pairs of knights in full plate. The knights are stationed on various steps, including the topmost. Which is where I sent her, to arrive head down. The rest should work itself out quite nicely." He turned to Oparlra. "Nice throw."

The priestess of Sharess shrugged. "I practice." She went to retrieve her dagger. "And I knew Hurmeldra was here in the castle to cause trouble. I . . . remember her, from years back."

"Oh?" Floonq asked, licking the blood off Oparlra's dagger before offering it to her.

"Oh," Oparlra replied flatly, accepting her weapon. "She has lots of piercings. Take that as you will."

Something hurtled out of the sky and splattered all over the front of a building farther down the alley. Then the streets were full of more wet splattered things. Floonq sniffed the air. "Goblins," he announced.

"They never learn," Oparlra told him. "Siege after siege. They wait until things get going, then demand higher pay, thinking they're catching the Thayans at a time of need. The Thayans promptly start loading them into the catapults. A minor problem promptly dealt with, so to speak."

There were more splattered goblins, all around.

"Charming," Jantharl muttered again. He watched Floonq make a gesture, and Tammaszar nod gravely in response. The familiar turned and scampered away.

"No, follow him not," the minotaur rumbled as the bard and the minstrel both turned to follow the urhult. "He'll be right back."

"Secrets, Tamm?" Melgor said sadly. "After all we've been through, thus far this day?"

The minotaur mage shook his head. "He's just retrieving the book."

"Retrieving it? You lost it?"

"I contrived to lose it, as the hunt approached. Now it's best back with us."

"You were worried about the hunt?" Oparlra asked in disbelief.

"One of the priests of Oghma read from the book a few days back. It was the last thing he did before fleeing the city. He broke his vow of silence to warn me

the book might go astray if I took it across the path of the hunt, so . . ."

"You believed him?" The priestess of Sharess frowned.

"He broke his silence. And he was right about the return of Amole, the so-high barbarian. Or rather, the book was."

"Sooner or later—probably sooner—you're going to have to read the book yourself, you know," she warned him.

The minotaur gave her a grim look. "I know. And there's nothing that terrifies me more."

The spattering sounds suddenly gave way to great castle-shaking booms. Dust rose, and pebbles and small stones fell from the surrounding buildings as the streets heaved.

"Bombardment, again." Melgor sighed, scrambling hastily to the nearest wall.

There were fresh explosions, and the street heaved again.

They watched soothsayers rush everywhere in the distance, gesticulating and shouting.

"Noisy idiots," the minstrel muttered. He watched the soothsayers wave their arms wildly while bellowing in a fanatical frenzy of fearful cajoling and explaining.

"They so often misconstrue," Tammaszar agreed, watching the yelling men milling around.

Then the distant street erupted, right in the midst of the soothsayers. The front of a building went down in a rush, a flood of stones and bricks and tumbling balconies . . . and then there was no more rushing around or yelling. Only the faint crashes of broken brick landing here and there.

"After that," Melgor observed in dry tones, "they're misconstrewn everywhere!"

Oparlra punched Melgor's arm in disgust at the quip.

The next bombard blast was uncomfortably closer, blinding them all with billowing dust. Roof tiles and slates crashed down in the wake of the explosion, bursting around them like small bombs . . . but all the blasts that followed were far away, south and east near the castle walls.

It seemed like an eternity before Floonq came trudging into view, cresting one heap of brick rubble after another, a book in its hands.

"What took you so long?" the minotaur rumbled sharply.

"Tathtauraunt's going to be angry," the urhult said brightly, by way of reply. He stopped in front of Tammaszar and proffered the book. "That bombard crew from Lantan scored a direct hit on the rat statue over the door of the festhall. Beheaded it."

"Well, you've got to get a head in this world," Jantharl and Melgor murmured in sardonic chorus.

Earning them a withering look from Oparlra. "Wasn't funny the first time, jacks," she informed them.

"Worse than that," Floonq said cheerfully. "The monocle's blown to bits. Leaving the eye tyrant nigh-blind. It's as nearsighted as the nearest dung fly."

"Huh. Folk aren't going to be pleased if they can't get into the festhall, that's for sure," Melgor commented.

The urhult grinned. "So the front's a shambles—and right now, there's flaming chaos raging inside. The gnome sappers—all greased to get through their tunnels, with dirt and stone dust sticking to them—came up through the floor of the enchanted weightless room. The lasses started screaming about an invasion by demons from the Abyss, so someone dragged the Sunites away from the few bottles and casks they hadn't drunk yet in the tavern and got them to try a banishing ritual. That failed, of course, and now everyone's fighting. That troll that believes she's a sultry she-elf thinks a mage cast invisibility on her during the brawl, so now she's out running around the streets, smacking into folk and triumphantly telling them they don't see her."

Melgor shook his head incredulously. "Just who—all right, besides us and the hunt and the soothsayers—is crazed enough to be out on the streets during this bombardment?"

"Dying Thaelans," the urhult said merrily. "There're a lot of them. The poison, remember? Humans do like to eat, you know."

"Floonq," Tammaszar said quietly, "what are you trying to pull?" He held out the book his familiar had just handed him. They could all read its title: *101 Inappropriate Uses for Sovereign Glue*.

The urhult's face fell. "Oh, no. Someone must have been watching. They must have stolen the book and put that in its place. Oh, *dung*."

"Oh, dung, indeed," the minotaur echoed grimly.

"So now what do we do?" Jantharl asked.

With no answers on their faces at all, everyone looked at him.

Just before the world exploded.

Chapter 12
The Demon and the Fork

Out of an eternity of tumbling fire, Jantharl cartwheeled in and out of half-remembered moments. In his dream, if dream it was, someone was strumming a harp randomly somewhere, and someone else was shouting.

"Jan? *Jan!*" It was Oparlra, and she sounded upset. So Jantharl swam past a cracked throne in a wavering turret that just had to be some unfamiliar part of Thaelfortress, heading for the nearest door. Her cries seemed to be louder in this direction. Around him, the besieged warriors suddenly all had doubles among the besiegers—and someone pulled a lever that made a defecting, fleeing Thael warrior turn and run back to the castle he'd just fled from. . . . Leaving that confusion behind him, Jantharl swam right through the closed door. Her shouts were coming from just ahead . . .

The waverings around him became wild ripplings, and it was much brighter. He blinked in suddenly blinding brightness . . .

"He's alive! Thank the gods, he's alive!" Oparlra cried, and Jantharl's mouth was suddenly covered with moist, warm lips he remembered. Arms tightened around him, and—and—

There was cloudy gray sky above him, framed by rather battered-looking buildings. Tammaszar and Melgor leaned over him.

"Thought that'd do it," Floonq said in satisfaction. "Bards get kissed so seldom that they always wake up so they won't miss it, when they actually *do* get some."

"Urhult," Oparlra commented, looking up from Jantharl, "belt up, or I'll belt you up. I do have some pain-is-pleasure spells, you know."

"That's right, threaten the urhult. That'll show how mighty and imperious you are. Men will quake in fear, or swoon in helpless lust."

They all watched warily, as Oparlra's fiery glare started to shift, and one of her hands rose slowly, motes of aroused magic winking softly around it, building. Her soundless snarl wavered, trembled, and burst into sputters of helpless mirth.

She looked around at the minotaur, the minstrel, and the bard beneath her. "Well? Start swooning, then!"

It was at that moment that the rubble beside her lifted. Broken bricks tumbled, and tentacles of glistening purple emerged, reaching for Jantharl. Cruel, long-nailed purple claws burst out of the stones to clutch at him.

Oparlra, twisting around on her knees to face this new menace, found herself nose to tentacles with the cold-eyed head of a mind flayer.

"Haven't you learned yet?" she snapped, as tentacles reached for her head in a deadly whirlwind. And she breathed a blue-white searing spell right into those baleful eyes.

The mind flayer gave off a high-pitched squalling as its mauve flesh darkened to a horrible greenish black. An appalling stink arose, wafting on wisps of smoke or steam. Between wary looks around for signs of other illithids emerging from the ground, they all watched those cold eyes go dark and sightless. The tentacles writhed in slow spasms of pain as they curled, retracted, and sank.

"I *hate* mind flayers," Oparlra announced. "A mind is a horrible thing to waste."

Rubble shifted nearby, and she turned and calmly called down a flame strike. A roaring column of flame flashed down, then seemed to suck stones and bricks and convulsing robed and tentacle-mouthed bodies up into its heart. The mind flayers had little time to shriek as they cooked.

"The Sunites," Melgor said grimly. "They took Pause away from her duties for their ritual, leaving the illithids to their own devices for too long."

"And just what are those devices?" Oparlra asked. "Do they want to rule in Thaelfortress, or make common cause with the Thayans? Or should we be standing back and letting them destroy the Thayans for us?"

The minstrel shrugged. "I don't think we dare wait to find out. They're always hatching plans—in which humans are always food."

"I talked to one of the imprisoned mind flayers, once," the minotaur mage said slowly, "and it claimed Tathtauraunt was a construct built by its kind. A failed attempt to create an eye tyrant equivalent of an elder brain."

"So would Tathtauraunt be able to sense that illithids just died, right here?" Floonq piped up. "If so, shouldn't we . . ."

"I think relocating would be a *superb* idea," Jantharl said, rolling out from under one of Oparlra's shapely legs and getting to his feet with a grunt and a slight stagger. Nothing seemed to be broken, and . . .

"Too late!" That shout came from the foremost of two hulking men in armor. They had just stepped out of an alley farther down the street. Clapping their visors down, they drew long, heavy swords and strode toward Jantharl and his companions.

"Oh, *dung*," Oparlra commented, looking back behind her and finding nothing but rubble there. "Let's get gone. Time for a good, invigorating 'flee for our lives' chase through the castle. We should be able to outrun these dolts."

"But that's away from the book," Tammaszar protested.

"Away from where the book *was*," Floonq pointed out. "I very much doubt it's there now."

"Good point," the minotaur admitted.

The five companions all turned and started to trot through the shifting rubble, away from the advancing pair in armor. The urhult was light enough to scamper along, but it was a nightmare of wading and slipping for the others.

Luckily, the pursuing men in armor were even slower.

Unluckily, as the companions reached the next alley, someone stepped out in front of them, leveling a pitchfork menacingly.

"Ye Watching Gods, what next?" Jantharl muttered. "Now they're sending *farmers* after us."

The man with the pitchfork had a fierce double-tusked mustache, sad and sunken eyes, and the weathered hands and well-worn clothes of a heave-dirt crofter.

He faced them like a battle champion who had a mighty army behind him.

"The pigeon," he informed them in a voice of doom, "hath visited me."

Jantharl gave him a swift smile before Floonq could offer its snide one. "That's nice," he said evenly. "And what does that visit portend?"

"I was on my knees in the furrows, praying to Chauntea for good crops," the farmer replied, "and

the pigeon came with its message and landed on my head. Brining word straight from the gods. I heeded, obeyed, and so am here on the holy mission I was charged with. To rally any dismissed besiegers to me to break the siege, to deliver the good folk of Fort Thesk, and to rid the soil of our fair land from the blighting tread of the undead and unholy Thayan invaders!"

He thrust the pitchfork forward meaningfully, letting them see its gleaming tines.

"We're not Thayans," Oparlra informed him. "We're some of the folk of Fort Thesk."

"And that's the cleanest, best-made pitchfork I've ever seen," Tammaszar added. "Wherever did you get it?"

The farmer frowned at the minotaur suspiciously, then peered down at his pitchfork. He frowned more deeply. "I don't hold with talking animals," he muttered, "but hrast me if this isn't my pitchfork at all! Yet it was . . . it was the only one leaning against the wall where I always leave mine. Feels the same, hefts the same, but . . . highly irregular. Hrasted suspicious, in fact."

He peered up at them. "And I see a talking man-bull, some sort of little goblinkin, and a woman and two men. And the two humans who've spoken thus far aren't from around here, to be sure. So you're *not* folk of the castle."

Melgor gave the man his best scowl. "Aren't we, now? And who does a Westslope farmer think he is, to be telling a man born and bred in the castle that he's not of the castle?"

"Minstrel, leave off! You, I know. And you've spent a few months a year here, and all the rest of your life off gallivanting around the Realms, picking up who knows what all crazed ideas and outlandish ways. You're not the innocent, hard-working, huddled-in-their-homes Thaelans I've come to rescue."

"Well, you'll have to make do with us," Floonq snapped, "because all the folk you're talking about–if they've eaten any fresh bread or sausage rolls or pies these last two days–are dead."

"As you will soon be, if you're who I think you are," boomed a hollow voice from behind the five companions. It came from inside the helm of the foremost of the two plate-armored warriors.

The two hulks of metal stalked up over the last heap of rubble. Their swords and daggers were drawn, cutting off any retreat Jantharl and his friends might have contemplated from the pitchfork. Which was starting to glow, now, not just gleam . . .

Floonq was already moving forward. No matter how truculent, one farmer with a pitchfork was less of a foe than two warriors in full plate. And a leap that was just right might well end in its catching hold of the farmer's mustache, allowing it to cling there, raking that bulbous red nose with its claws while its friends rushed past . . .

"Maeroch!" one of the warriors gasped. "Look! Yon pitchfork–can it be?"

Tammaszar whirled to look at the two warriors, dragging Oparlra back as he did so. She shot him a furious look, but she was off balance and stumbling backward. The bard and the minstrel moved smoothly with her, leaving Floonq facing the farmer alone.

The urhult blinked, saw its isolation between the armored warriors and the farmer, and scampered to join the others. The farmer reached after him with the pitchfork, but then turned his attention to the advancing warriors.

"Yes!" Maeroch agreed, his voice suddenly deeper and hungrier. "It can!" He advanced swiftly.

"Stay back!" snapped the famer. "Stay back, or I'll–right, I warned you!"

As the fork jabbed out, Maeroch flung his sword in the farmer's face–and grabbed the tines thrusting at him.

There was a flash, a roar of ascending flame, a delighted bellow of laughter from inside the warrior's helm, and–

Tammaszar of the Ten Invoked Tempests leaned forward and shouted a spell.

There was a greater flash, a wild scattering of sparks–and Maeroch was gone.

"Thought so," the minotaur said in satisfaction. "Behold–one demon sent back to the Abyss, just as he regained his powers! Deftly done, if I do say so myself."

The remaining warrior snarled angrily inside his helm and advanced on them. The bleeding farmer stopped cursing and staggering and wringing his empty, smoking hands. And Jantharl gave Tammaszar his best exasperated look.

"I realize this is far from the most opportune time, but I'm afraid my patience has run out. Saer wizard, will you please tell me what, by all the Watching Dancing Gods, is going on?"

Chapter 13
Some Attempted Explanations

Floonq groaned, rolled its eyes, and looked up at its master.

"Please don't," it said. "My head still hurts from your last, er, attempted explanation."

"Then I'll keep it short," Tammaszar snapped. "Maeroch is a demon. I'd heard about him. He was summoned here by one Skelznyn, lately of Tsurlagol–and when the priests of the city found out what Skelznyn had done, they called on the gods to task him to accompany Maeroch and keep him out of trouble. Isn't that right, Skelznyn?"

The remaining warrior stopped, sheathed his dagger with an angry jerk, and used his freed hand to doff his helm.

"They did more than that," he said sourly. "Those meddling holynoses laid bindings on Maeroch that left him not knowing who he was, or how to wield

his powers. Making him useless to me. Unless he laid hands on an enchanted item of the Abyss and used its power to break the bindings. That pitchfork was one such. And you ruined it, man-bull! For which, old foe, you will now pay the price! I should have done this years ago!"

Pointing his sword at Tammaszar as if it were a lance, he snarled an incantation. Purple lightning burst into being, racing up and down its blade, ever swifter and brighter.

The minotaur mage started shouting out a spell, and Oparlra hissed an incantation, too—but into the purple crackling heart of it all charged the farmer, roaring out prayers to Chauntea and defiance to demon summoners in one long, incoherent raging breath.

Lightning stabbed him and coiled around him, sending him dancing involuntarily. But he kept coming, his hands blackening and his gashed face dripping with blood. He struck the purple sword aside with one blow, and sent Skelznyn reeling with another. Lightning stabbed out to rake defenseless rubble rather than living foes.

By then Tamm's spell had made Skelznyn's armor red-hot, cooking him alive inside, and Oparlra's spell had enveloped Skelznyn's head in a cloud of whirling incense, making him cough and weep and choke uncontrollably.

Skelznyn staggered back on shifting stone, slipped, and fell. He tried to shriek with pain but lacked the wind to do so. What came out was a horrid, strangled whooping sound. Even that ended when the dying farmer toppled, crashing down atop Skelznyn's head with all his weight.

"Well, master," Floonq observed in the sudden silence, "you're certainly maintaining the usual body count that tends to surround you." They watched the last few purple sparks die out around the sword Skelznyn still clutched. "We'd better find somewhere to sit down and hide before anyone else comes charging up to engage in dastardly battle with us. We need some time to think, to try to decide where to look for the book—remember the book?—before . . ."

"Too late!" a new and heavily accented voice roared from behind them. "Amole is upon you, recreants! Decadent city *scum*! What have you done with the pitchfork? Aye? Hey? One of you will aha-tell me, or all of you will aha-*die*!"

The barbarian who bellowed at them waved his dagger menacingly as he spoke. He wore furs, badly made furred boots, crisscrossing baldrics a-bristle with what looked like small kitchen knives, and a two-horned helmet as tall as he was.

He seemed to come up to about the height of Jantharl's knee.

It was the man who'd been riding the elephant.

"Where is that pitchfork?" Amole bellowed, his voice an astonishingly loud warhorn-like blare for such a tiny man. It echoed off the walls around them. "I love that pitchfork! I see it bobbing behind the hay bales, and I'm in *love*-aha!"

Oparlra sighed and made a swift gesture while murmuring something. The barbarian fell still and silent in mid-roar. And he then literally fell, toppling over because he'd been charging at them, and had one leg raised in mid-stride. He lay there like a little glaring statue.

"This," the priestess said in exasperation, "is Amole. He's not been the same since he got whacked on the head last year with a giant's club, while he was singlehandedly defending the castle walls."

"Well," Jantharl observed, "that makes him fit right in around here."

Oparlra gave him a hard look. "Between the missionaries and the hunt, last year, there was a time when there were no defenders on the walls—except Amole. There he was, leaping up and down to try to look over the ramparts. All the Thayans saw were those two horns on his helmet bobbing into view, then falling out of sight, then bobbing up again. Word around the castle is that the Thayan commanders got into quite a heated debate about when and where to assault the walls. Some of them thought a huge trap had been prepared, because no one would otherwise be stupid enough to leave the walls undefended."

Melgor snorted. "Yet they attacked, all right. And I don't believe the embellishment about the rude gesture for one instant. We're talking Thayans, remember?"

"What embellishment?" Jantharl asked, backing away from the toppled barbarian. "How long is he going to stay like that, by the way?"

"If none of us touch him, until sundown," Oparlra replied. "And as the embellishment has it, the Thayans thought the bobbing horns were a rude gesture meant for them, so they attacked."

"Wars have started for sillier reasons," Melgor observed.

"So they have. Bah. Let's head for the Cursing Priestess, or what's left of it," Tammaszar suggested. "I'm getting thirsty."

"Brilliant idea, master," Floonq piped up.

The minotaur gave him a dark look. "You brought back the wrong book," he reminded his familiar.

"To err is human, to forgive, bovine!" Floonq replied brightly.

"Which reminds me," Oparlra said, giving the urhult a glare to quell any further flippancies it might be thinking of making. "That book has been—was—yours for some time. Tell me, what happens when you try to read it in the usual manner, from front to back?"

"It makes your eyes go funny," Floonq said. "My master was stumbling around rubbing at his for a day and a night. Left him a little nearsighted."

"So you *have* looked in the book!" Melgor pounced.

Tammaszar sighed. "Of course I have. Looked inside, not read it. As I recall, the script changed at one point, from tongue to tongue. To something I couldn't read."

"But before that," Jantharl put in, "what did the passages you *could* read say? Were they a string of separate prophecies or pronouncements, dark hints about the Three Who Wait and so on, or did they tell a tale?"

The minotaur shrugged. "I told truth when I said I looked, rather than read it. I really don't know."

"Talk around the castle says it tells the story of a siege," Melgor offered.

"The current siege, always," Floonq corrected.

"In my temple," Oparlra said, surprising them all, "the senior priestesses say *Lanthroanra's Unfolding Lament* is a thing of evil. The words that appear in it are the work of an evil, malicious sentience. It often writes about the means of its own destruction, but these writings are invariably lures to mislead the unwary to their own doom. Attempts to destroy the book guided by its own contents are always embarrassing, often fatal, and never successful."

"That's not surprising," the minotaur told her.

"There's more," Oparlra told him. "They assert that the reason so many bizarre things befall the castle is because the book is here. It's corrupt and degrading, warping the very Realms around it. That's why so many folk want to destroy it. They feel its influence, and instinctive revulsion seizes them. They want to be rid of it, *now*."

"And are you one of them?" Floonq asked, scuttling to where it could bar her way and force an answer.

The priestess of Sharess regarded the urhult thoughtfully. "I don't know." She gave him a wry grin. "I think hosting many bizarre happenings is the very nature of Thaelfortress, book or no book."

Melgor grinned. "Well said."

They clambered over more rubble—and discovered themselves amid the soothsayers again.

"But those who stuff and preserve dead animals will be struck with terror when Lord Rustable brings back what he slew while hunting!"

"What Thaelfortress needs is a good chase! For know you that the walls around us, the cobbles beneath our boots, and even the rainspout gargoyles have an internal blood we cannot see. And like us, they need their blood stirred from time to time to sluice away the sloth and shame and confusion that builds up like detritus in a cellar corner, so that the castle can truly *live*!"

Wincing, heads down, they hurried through the din. Wild-eyed, long-bearded soothsayer after unwashed soothsayer pressed close to them, earnestly trying to convey the burden of his thoughts to this returning audience.

"Yet among the Thayans outside our walls is one who desires in his heart to join us, to live in the castle and defend it against his fellows! Like all Thayans, he finds truth a frightening thing, and he is no convincing liar. The time will come when he will run backward into our midst, unable to tarry longer in the grip of the evil that is Thay! Those who hail from Lantan and who are hard of hearing will hear him confess his shifting loyalties, but because they hear not well, will misunderstand."

"Gods above," Jantharl muttered to Melgor, "some of these madwits sound almost . . . enlightened."

The minstrel opened his mouth to reply—and a soothsayer thrust his face right into Melgor's and bawled, "If it was a kender minotaur, we would know who moved my cheese!"

The sidelong look the minstrel gave Jantharl was silent but eloquent.

The next soothsayer's words startled everyone.

"Is it too early to destroy the book?"

Chapter 14
Blasphemy and Some Solutions

"Blasphemer!" the next soothsayer bellowed. He swung his fists with vigor, clubbing to the ground the one who'd asked about destroying the book. Others enthusiastically joined in the pummeling, rushing into a great knot of punching, stamping, shouting men.

"Well, there goes any chance of questioning that one," Jantharl called to his companions. Everyone except the urhult nodded, and they fought their way on.

Straight into the heart of another knot of hard-shouting soothsayers, who seemed in good voice right then.

"Yet it is written that in time to come, the dragon, worse for drink, shall end up in the sewers, fighting the illithids, and that combat shall decide the fate of worlds!"

"And the paladin laid on hands, was withered, and despaired. Priests of his faith spoke to him, saying, 'Behold, this that you have found is the Hand of Vecna, and verily as long as you bear it, you shall walk alone, and have no wife'!"

"And that kender had no doppelganger, but fled from world to world, because it was pursued by a lovelorn suitor. This suitor was a bard who used only the name 'Elvish' and forever sang a ballad he called 'Love Me Kender,' that made the kender wax wroth and know horror at one and the same time . . ."

"Then let it be known across all the lands that the beagle ended up in a butcher's shop, only to have the butcher who coveted the lance of the kender kneel before him. The butcher venerated the beagle and sought to deliver him from the siege by the covert use of a dogapult. Then did the tiny barbarian espy the beagle and deem it his war-steed. He rode off upon the beagle with the butcher in tow. Or toe; the writing is unclear. At least I think it says toe, but . . . a moment, please . . ."

"For the root of all that troubles the castle is a court crier, who keeps trying to prevent happenings that must befall if the present tale is to end!"

"For the truth can now be revealed! The half-orc and the half-elf were half-brothers. Their mother gave

her name as Tuckaer Orfalconer, and made her living plucking chickens."

"The spy came from the dungeons, through the sewers, to the royal gardens, where he remained for years, posing as a statue. Got away with it for years!"

"Beware! For as she said, though too few believed her, it will return when least expected!"

"For it has been foretold that the tiny barbarian shall carry a torch for the farmer, and so the flame shall be borne onward!"

"And the book of truths shall be called *Time and Innocence, Once Lost, Can Never Be Regained*. And it shall correct misspellings, and so seek to prevent wild magic."

"The invisible troll shall escape and live happily ever after!"

"The armies that beset and oppress Thaelfortress are linked to the liar, and he shall be held responsible for their deeds by the gods, in time soon to come!"

"And if ever the corset of custards and that bomb are brought together, the castle will go up in flans!"

"Really? Now that, I'd want to experience!" Floonq replied to the last saying, as the five companions burst out of the din and hastened on down the street.

They reached the next cross street just in time to see a donkey cart rumble past with three illithids standing in it.

A trio of mind flayers who turned, made mocking gestures, and held up a book for the five companions to see.

It was *Lanthroanra's Unfolding Lament*.

One of the illithids opened the book, read something aloud in a horrible, liquid language, pointed one of its hands at a nearby building . . . and the building slumped down in a flood of rotting slime.

The other mind flayers waved merrily at Jantharl and the others as the cart rumbled away.

"After them!" Tammaszar bellowed unnecessarily. Everyone was already sprinting after the cart.

Before that moment, Jantharl hadn't really thought about whether mind flayers could smile or not. Just then, he discovered that they could. Nastily.

"There they are!" bellowed a deep voice from somewhere far behind them. "Open fire!"

That didn't sound good. Jantharl skidded to a stop and spun around.

To stare into the distant sneer of a giant in full armor. The giant stood outside the castle walls and looked down at them from the other side.

Jantharl grabbed Oparlra's shoulder and shoved her sideways, into Melgor—pushing both of them toward the cross street they were just passing. They looked back in time to see the first *big* bombard from Lantan.

It smote their ears like an iron fist, echoing off the castle walls and turrets and the mountains behind them. After that first brutal blow, they could hear only faintly, through a muted jangling ringing. The bombard was literally deafening, so they felt rather than heard the terrific crash of its ball, farther down the street.

On its way, that projectile had neatly beheaded one of the mind flayers in the cart. The headless mind flayer's body spurted dark gore in all directions and wavered back and forth like a boneless thing. Its two fellow illithids grabbed hold of the headless illithid from either side and tried to hold it up—and hang on, as they hauled hard on the reins of the terrified donkey. The donkey dragged its burden around in a rough and rattling curve, into a side street.

"If we run down this street for a block, then cut up the next one, we should end up on their tail again," Tammaszar bellowed. His voice sounded like a faint and hollow echo in Jantharl's ravaged ears. "That'll get us away from that bombard, until it's aimed anew."

Oparlra nodded as she ran, all of them sprinting along with her. They went down to the end of the block, then turned left sharply, into the street.

Where they heard a sound that was chillingly familiar, thanks to the past battles and sieges all of them had lived through. The thrumming, hissing sound of a great volley of arrows in the air. Followed thankfully by the thudding and cracking of all of those shafts striking the cobbles far in their wake. The Thayan bowmen couldn't match the distance of the bombard's throw.

Looking back toward the castle walls, they saw a lone figure in the street. A gnome, who was rapidly becoming a pincushion amid the last of the falling shafts. As he staggered and then fell, Melgor winced and gasped, "Gnome on the range."

"Just be glad we're beyond their reach." Oparlra panted, still running hard.

"What I want to know is how we're going to get the book from a pair of mind flayers!" Tammaszar bellowed. "I don't even know if we can catch them!"

"I don't know why we're crazed enough to try," Jantharl shouted back.

"Because we—I—*like* it here, and don't want Thaelfortress ruined beyond repair or changed into some sort of Thayan prison or mind flayer citadel. You can write ballads about the struggle to prevent that—and our glorious victory!"

"Or gallant defeat," Jantharl muttered, knowing he'd be unheard among all the hard breathing, the cracking of shifting shards of brick and stone underfoot, and the din from the castle walls.

Up ahead, there was a sudden bouncing clatter as the donkey cart carrying the illithids raced across the street, heading back toward the mustering yard. Something fell—no, was tossed—from the conveyance.

The dead, headless mind flayer sprawled wetly on the cobbles in front of them. Just for an instant, Jantharl met the chill gaze of the illithid that had tossed the corpse.

And found himself shivering. It held a cold, clear warning.

"Stlarning *monsters*," Oparlra hissed beside him. "I'll be lashed and blasted by Sharess herself if I'm going to let them take the castle away from us, or change it, or—come *on*!"

She turned onto a side street that was free of rubble and started to really run. The others pelted after her.

"There's a . . . tale I've heard, master," the urhult gasped, racing beside Tammaszar, "that if you open the book in front of the statue and hold it up, the statue—who edited the book, or wrote it, or some such—will read it aloud. Then, both the book and statue will . . . disappear. Mayhap that's . . . what the tentacle-faces are going to try!"

"I've heard lots of tales about the statue and the book, Floonq," Tammaszar replied grimly. "They can't all be true. All I know is that we can't let them slip away with the book, leaving us having to hunt for it. We must—"

The air in front of them glowed, a radiance that disgorged a dozen wild-eyed, bearded men and then vanished as swiftly as it had come.

The soothsayers, charging at the five companions with their arms spread to grapple and their mouths spewing warnings and prophecies nonstop, did not.

Chapter 15
For Sooths and Minds Still Free

A soothsayer rushed at Jantharl. "Know you that the kender will seek to leap into the vortex that the statue and book disappear into! Then the fabric of reality will right itself, and we'll all learn what was going on before!"

"I never trust anyone who talks about the fabric of reality," Jantharl snarled at the man, as he ducked another soothsayer's clutching hands. "Someone 'ported these mad-heads here to delay us!" he called to his companions.

"Proclaim the obvious, bard!" the urhult snapped, leaping with both feet onto a soothsayer's toes. The man's oration promptly turned into a howl of hopping pain.

Which did nothing at all to stifle the next soothsayer, right behind the hopping one.

"Trapped in a loop of time we are, here in Fort Thesk!" he told everyone within earshot. "The kender's presence will end that loop!"

Another grabbed Oparlra from behind, wrapping his arms around her and slowing her sprint to a stagger.

"All seekers of truth know the assassin's poison brings on visions, false visions that mislead the unwary!" he declaimed into her ear. "Know you, all of you, that the dragon's bubbles drive away these falsehoods, and let the enlightened see clearly!"

"Very helpful. Thank you, saer!" Oparlra snapped, going to the cobbles in a sudden roll that succeeded in breaking the soothsayer's firm grasp.

Another soothsayer promptly rushed in to grapple with her. "The troll who thought itself invisible once picked up the book you seek," he told her brightly, "and the book sought to communicate with him by using a pop-up—but he thought it alive and dangerous, and so put it down and moved on."

Oparlra sighed, lifted one leg in a brutally hard kick, then twisted free as the soothsayer shrieked and let go of her to clutch at his injured anatomy.

"If the Sunites are allowed to enact the ritual they intend around the statue, it will learn how to work stone-shaping magic and how doing so can endanger us all!" another soothsayer warned, trying to grab Tammaszar.

The minotaur turned and slashed at the man with one horn to keep him at bay, then whirled around and ran on. "Don't let them slow us down!" he bellowed. "Keep running!"

"The goliath will fall in love with the statue and defend it as they dance together!" another soothsayer called. "It's very important that you hear and heed this!"

"I'm sure," Jantharl panted, "but important to whom? Other madmen?"

Melgor crashed to the cobbles an instant later, dragged down by a soothsayer who'd literally climbed up his back while chanting, "If the cowardly minotaur ever reads the book entirely through, he will learn he must destroy the castle. Else he and everyone he loves and all who dwell within the castle will perish in a great battle!"

Another soothsayer rushed up to bawl into the minstrel's face. "A hero sought to destroy the statue nine winters ago, but those who wanted Thaelfortress doomed sent a roc, flying hard, to stop him. He died, crushed against the base of the statue—caught between a roc and a hard place."

Melgor winced. "Aaargh! Do all of you seek to be bad minstrels? Because—"

A third soothsayer joined in, clutching at the minstrel's throat to silence him. "Beware the red umber hulk," he intoned, his voice heavy with impressively portentous doom. "It wrote the book ascribed to the dragonborn *and* the sovereign blue tome. It encountered the gnome sappers in their tunnels, and they doused it in red paint, leaving it well red. It will become part of their bomb."

"Their *bomb*?" Tammaszar asked in disbelief, delivering a hard kick that sent two of the soothsayers crouched over Melgor flying. Then he hauled the third to his feet, dragging the winded minstrel upright with him. "Have you any more foolishness to spout?"

The soothsayer gaped at him. "Why, minotaur, you've heard almost none of what all folk *must* know, to save the Realms from doom! There's the matter of the statue's garter belt, and that of the knight-commander here in Thaelfortress, who tore out his own hair in frus—"

"My question," Tammaszar informed the soothsayer gravely, as he flung the still gabbling man

bodily into two or three of his approaching fellows, "was, I fear, rhetorical. My apologies."

Another soothsayer was already hurrying up from another direction, proclaiming to the street at large, ". . . yet the deaf adventurer was heard to say, as he departed the festhall, 'Well, that was disappointing; they only had a dragon hoard in there. I fancied . . . companionship.' And from that moment forth, the—*oop*!"

"Sorry," Jantharl said to the sprawling, winded man he'd just kneed in the gut and then shoved sprawling over his knee to tumble headfirst onto the cobbles. "But not very."

"Hence the decapitation," the man continued obliviously to the stones his nose had just met. "Yet there will come a day when . . ."

"We run out of soothsayers at *last*." Melgor finished the soothsayer's sentence heartily, and the five companions rushed on.

They raced out into the littered—but for the moment thankfully not under bombardment—mustering yard, where the donkey cart limped along ahead of them, one of its wheels broken and wobbling. The poor donkey shivered and shuddered under the fierce mental goading of the surviving pair of illithids riding in its cart.

With one accord the five companions ducked low, refrained from shouting, and ran across the yard, passing on the other side of the statue from the limping cart.

And so, they reached Violatarr's Magnificent Mansion of Taste Violations at the same time as the two mind flayers.

Who turned to hiss, writhe their tentacles, and hurl fear, pain, and the illusion of a sprouting forest of hungrily reaching tentacles at the five companions.

Which was their first mistake. At the first sign of Tammaszar readying a spell, they raised their clawed hands to awaken their enchanted rings and hurl forth magic. Sizzling ruby beams of magic shot out of the rings—beams that dissolved everything in their path, but thankfully fell short of the minotaur—followed by cones of emerald magic that Jantharl didn't like the look of at all, and . . .

The mind flayers entirely forgot to continue coercing their donkey.

The donkey promptly tried to flee from them. It leaped through the festhall's front display window—filigreed screens and oh-so-tasteful scantily garbed mannequins and all—in a terrific bell-like shattering of ruby-hued bubble glass.

Floonq winced. "Now *there's* a major ass in the pane!"

The illithids rocked as their cart almost overturned, then were forced to stop loosing deadly magic to clutch the cart's sides, just trying to stay aboard. The terrified donkey kicked and bucked and kept on racing forward, taking the cart through the window and into the festhall.

"Oh, no," the urhult commented. "*Not* wise. Don't put the cart before the whor—"

There were flashes and screams and toppling statuettes and tapestries inside the festhall. The illithids had let loose with their rings again.

The five hurrying companions saw one of the house ladies appear in the shattered window. The mind flayers struggled with something right behind her.

She stood shivering and barking and staring wide-eyed, every strand of her long hair thrust straight out from her skull like the spines of a stingback sea urchin. Then a well-thrown brick from Oparlra crashed into a mind flayer face, right between its eyes, and its mental assault on the lady was broken.

Drooling and whimpering, the festhall professional fled out of the ravaged window and down the street.

"Sane folk would flee like all the Hells right now," Melgor commented, as the five rushed the last few strides to the gaping window.

Jantharl chuckled as he bent and scooped up more broken bricks to hurl. "I guess none of us are sane folk, or want to be."

Deep in the front parlor of Violatarr's Magnificent Mansion of Taste Violations, the cart was on its side. Its lone visible wheel—the broken one and the uppermost part of the shattered conveyance—still spun crazily. The illithids were struggling to get free of it, their robes caught.

Jantharl led the charge.

When a purple hand swept up, the ring on it flaring, he threw one of his bricks hard and accurately, smashing illithid fingers and the deadly ruby beam aside with them. Then, once he was close enough to slash with his dagger, he flung his other brick sidelong at the second mind flayer.

Suddenly his mind sagged under the crushing weight of yellow thunder, red and black menace, and looming illithid eyes.

Eyes inside his head, staring white and relentless, larger . . . and larger . . .

He sliced and hacked blindly but furiously, his blade ripping something solid but wet and increasingly yielding. There was a horrid smell, a gush of hot gore, agonized squalling that rose into a wail, and—

Wood smoke, strong and sudden. Followed by, abruptly, nothing under his feet.

Jantharl fell into darkness, not even having time enough to scream.

Chapter 16
A Fat Minstrel No More

Jantharl fell, slamming his elbow numblingly against a post and the back of his head against something he never saw. Then he landed on something solid, with a meaty *smack*.

A body. A body that grunted in pain as it collapsed under his sudden arrival. As it slammed to the floor, he rolled off it to his feet, to blink and peer into the gloom, his dagger still ready.

One of the illithids had used its magic to burn through the floor. It meant more to free itself than to try to harm him, and ended up dumping him into the uppermost cellar of the festhall, into one of the private rooms.

A chamber, he was interested to learn, that held a group of masked men who'd been . . . licking custard off a glowing golden corset worn by another of the house ladies. He'd just slammed one of those men to the floor and the rest stared at him dazedly. The house lady sat up on her table, gaping at him in similar astonishment.

"Well met," Jantharl managed. Adding a cheerful grin, he spun around, found a door, and fled through it.

Angry cries arose behind him, so he dodged around a corner where the dark passage forked. Yanking open the first door he found, he slipped through it and closed it as quickly as he quietly could.

Overhead, the fresh crashes of spell blasts and tumbling bodies befell and raged. Amid the din, someone rushed past his door.

Jantharl kept very still.

He was alone in a much smaller room, a spy chamber that had holes in one wall that looked out into a larger, well-lit room.

A voice hissed close by, seeming to come from that second, larger room. "Halt and converse in peace, or *die*. That paint we doused you with will explode if we trigger it, killing you and setting off our other bombs—and so destroying most of Fort Thesk."

"Will kill *you*, too," rumbled a deep, liquid voice that didn't sound anywhere near human. Jantharl risked approaching a spy hole to look in its direction.

The liquid voice came from an umber hulk that dripped with wet crimson paint. Seven gnomes stood in a ring around it, their bodies glistening with grease. The gnomes held all sorts of strange-looking little things of metal and glass that winked and pulsed and had buttons and pull-rods and hoses.

Wonderful. In that instant, the pitched battle overhead seemed a much safer place to be.

"No," the hissing voice—which belonged to one of the oldest-looking gnomes—said. "We protect ourselves against the blasts we cause. It is a mistake to assume we are as foolish as humans."

"So, you want?"

Jantharl winced. The umber hulk could put more scorn into three words than a scandalized duchess.

"Your strength. Muscle the dragonborn statue down from its plinth and carry it to the castle gates yonder. There, thrust it like a battering ram to batter and break the hinges of the castle gates from the inside."

"*More* foolish than humans. If statue chipped, even slightly, it come to life. Will defend Thaelfortress, killing you and all the besiegers. Smash you to slime and powdered bone. Undead, Red Wizards, dragons, *everyone*. Even well-greased little gnomes."

"Even if we make sure its first smash against the gates shatters the hinges *and* the statue—entirely—into little shards?"

"All little shards will whirl in air like blades and spears. Tireless. Same slaughter." The umber hulk sounded amused.

"And just how would you know all this?" one of the gnomes said, sneering.

"Has happened before with others made statues by same wizard."

"Wait," one of the gnomes told its fellows. It advanced on the umber hulk. "So if this statue is something or someone turned to stone, who is it?"

"See bad, you? Dragonborn monk. Doomed to be statue until atonement done."

"And when will that be?"

"When book she wrote, book that writes self from back to front, writings ever-changing, magic book with wisp of divine power for foretelling, is destroyed. Something only she can do."

"Do *how*?"

"Will summon book and devour it, if awakened properly."

"Which is?" another gnome prompted impatiently.

"Corset of custard summoning and matching garter belt must be put on statue. Ring, that makes maids into men and men into maids and back, must be knotted on one of garter tails. Human must then remove garter belt, with teeth not hands."

"What mad-wits utter *fool* came up with that method of destroying the book?"

"Wise old wizard. Typical of humor."

There it was again, that corset of custard summoning . . .

Jantharl firmly quelled a sigh and turned gingerly, trying to keep utterly silent.

Jantharl turned gingerly, trying to keep utterly silent. Something shifted down his front, near his belt, and he remembered the purse. He turned back to the light coming through the spy holes and retrieved the purse with slow, quiet care. Then, he dared to open it.

The gnomes pressed the umber hulk for all it could tell them of "special" defenders of the castle, but Jantharl paid little attention. He was too busy peering.

They were gems, all right. Rubies and sapphires and emeralds, some of them bigger than his thumb. He slipped a few into one of his other pouches, then closed the purse again and hurried back to the room into which he'd fallen.

The masked men were—thankfully—gone. The house lady was mopping up custard, looking less than pleased. Jantharl stepped into the room and quietly closed the door.

The lady looked up. "You," she said, and her voice was not friendly.

"Ah, lady, I am sorry for my unpleasant—but unintentional, I assure you!—arrival. I, ah, wish to do business with you."

"Oh?" the house lady responded in quite a different voice. She struck a pose. Jantharl couldn't help but notice . . . many things. But one of them was that she wore a golden garter belt that matched her glowing, already-sprouting-fresh-custard corset.

"The garments you now wear—may I buy them from you?"

The displeased look returned. "Certainly not! This is the easiest gig I've ever had!"

Jantharl sighed. Yes, it would be, wouldn't it?

"It pains me to do this," he announced, "but . . ."

He drew his dagger and strode toward her in the same smooth, swift, aye-I-*do*-mean-business-and-am-good-at-it movement.

The house lady eyed Jantharl's blade, then his face, and concluded defeat was better than death or slashed flesh and a lost career.

"Very well," she said sullenly, "but take yourself back the other side of that door while I change. Our agreement covers the garments only."

Jantharl bowed. "Agreement," he echoed. He stepped back through the door.

He counted to four, slowly, then opened it again.

He was in time to see the house lady rush through the secret panel she'd just slid open, to flee—straight into Melgor's waiting fist.

"My apologies," the minstrel told her politely as she toppled, out cold. Then he caught her nearest arm to keep her from crashing to the flagstones. With a grunt of effort, he hefted her onto the table.

"This'll go faster," he told Jantharl, "with two of us. You roll and hold her as I undo things."

"The voice of experience?"

"Umm-hmm."

They left her face up on the table, covered with a warming robe they found hanging on a stand behind the door. By then, she was snoring slightly. Jantharl left the purse of gems on her tummy by way of payment.

"We still have to find a certain ring," he told the minstrel, as they headed through the panel into the passage down which the house lady had intended to flee. "One that turns maids into men, and—"

Melgor flung up a hand for silence and then pointed to one of the fingers on it.

A finger adorned with a ring.

As he and Jantharl stared at each other, the minstrel slowly and meaningfully slid the ring off.

And was suddenly a fat minstrel no more.

Jantharl found himself gaping at a buxom woman.

He was speechless. Flabbergasted.

And was still gaping when the woman reached out, grabbed his hand, and said briskly, "Come on! We've got a book to destroy before those illithids get a chance to use it! Oh, and I'm Melgora."

"Melgora? As in the pirate?"

"The same. Not all dangerous women are lithe, thin waifs with big dark eyes and little pouts." She towed him on down the passage into deeper darkness, fumbling a tiny glowstone out of a bodice pouch so they could see. "Don't let go of that garter belt, now!"

Jantharl clutched it more tightly, aware that the corset clutched against it was dripping custard. "Uh, the illithids will use the book to do what, exactly?"

"To summon thirty devils, of course! Don't you bards know your lore?"

"Not *that* sort of lore!"

"Ah, the juicy bits you're missing!"

They hurried up a steep stair, into a small closet-like chamber with doors on all sides. Melgora led Jantharl through one of them and out of the festhall. They emerged into the brighter light of—the mustering yard. Which was being bombarded again.

"There they are!" The shout was feminine and furious. "Die, fools!"

Chapter 17
The End of Many Things

The flash was blinding, and Jantharl was dimly aware of tongues of lightning snarling and spitting greedily all around him.

"That should have slain us," he gasped aloud, a little dazedly. Melgora still had firm hold of his hand and was dragging him along. Hard.

"Come *on*, bard!"

Facing them, barring their way to the statue and ignoring the coach-sized boulders that hurtled down out of the sky to crash here and there in the courtyard, was Hurmeldra Straelstone. The chaos sorcerer's hand was bandaged, and her eyes were two flames of mad hatred.

"Still standing? Have more lightning! *Die*, hrast you!"

"Yes, die, servants of dark gods!"

That voice was louder, male, familiar, and much closer.

Jantharl ducked sideways as he ran, out of sheer habit.

The furious paladin of Sune was cleaving the air so wildly that his sword would probably have missed Jantharl anyway.

Melgora sighed. "No spell wall can hold back holy folk forever." She let go of Jantharl's hand long enough to snatch something from her belt and empty it. Then she grabbed him again and ran on.

From right behind them came the sound of an armored paladin slipping helplessly on scores of glass marbles. Followed by the sounds of the same armored paladin bouncing helplessly and profanely on the flagstones.

Then Straelstone's second spell struck them.

Jantharl felt pain and a little numbness. Whatever Melgora wore or carried that drank in the lightning had run out, or run down, or—

"Not so fast!" a voice hissed from near their feet. The gnomes!

Sure enough, no less than three flagstones ahead of them had lifted. Each of them sported a greased gnome underneath. The nearest one heaved what looked like a large metal cauldron with its lid crudely welded shut out into the courtyard. It bore the legend, "Dubious Construction Coster, Duly Bonded and Warranted."

"Your bomb." Jantharl sighed. "I *knew* we'd—"

With a *kerrrrAASSHHH* that shook Jantharl's back teeth, a boulder the size of a small cottage obliterated Straelstone, the bomb, and two of the gnomes and their flagstones. Just one gnome was left to stare at Jantharl—and gulp audibly and descend out of sight.

Leaving their way to the statue clear.

Jantharl looked back over his shoulder. As he'd expected, a bruised and angry Mandurjack was back on his feet and past the marbles. The paladin limped, slashing the air with his large and sharp sword as he came.

The flagstones shook under them—but it wasn't because of two boulders that arrived at that moment to bounce noisily across the mustering yard, clearing away a few of the deceased broadsheet scribes and their cages. The source of the vibrations was too close to Melgora and Jantharl for that.

In fact, it was close enough for them to clearly see something shining in the gaps between the heaving flagstones.

"Oh, *dung*," the bard and minstrel said together, in unintended, disgusted unison.

Tathtauraunt rose into view with majestic slowness, a quartet of baleful eye tyrants all joined together by a massive central body as big as some of the boulders the Thayans were so enthusiastically throwing. As if on cue, one such giant boulder smote a distant building and sent its upper floors toppling.

"Feel no worry!" a familiar voice called from behind them. "Leave Tathtauraunt to us!"

It was Oparlra. Tammaszar and Floonq—munching on a piece of mind flayer tentacle with an air of contentment—were with her. Almost casually, the minotaur unleashed a spell that dropped the paladin flat on his face and into immobile silence.

Far across the courtyard beyond the statue, another boulder landed and shattered with a noise not unlike the sound of a falling keep slamming into the buildings below it.

Jantharl recalled the last time he'd heard that particular noise. He winced at the memory and snarled, "Not *now*!" aloud to himself. Then he and Melgora were at the statue at last.

They swarmed up Lanthroanra with a fine disregard for her race and gender and began the struggle to get the corset of custard summoning on her.

"Garter belt first," Melgora gasped after their first few attempts. Their eyes smarted and their ears rang from the flashes and shrieking explosions the beholder cast—as well as the warding spells and forcewalls with which Oparlra and Tammaszar defended.

"As the song goes," Melgora snarled fiercely, as she wrestled with garter tails, "feel no worry, my right and rightfully trembling—*yes*!"

Jantharl rather dazedly watched Melgora finish knotting the ring into the garter tails. They'd done it.

He let out a huge sigh, took hold of Lanthroanra's stony leg, fixed his teeth around the garter belt, and let himself slide down.

As it came off, Fort Thesk seemed to go very quiet around them. In that hush, stone turned to flesh in front of Jantharl's eyes.

The dragonborn monk drew back her foot and kicked Jantharl's head—very hard.

Whereupon the world went away again.

Dark.

Deep.

Darker.

Deeper.

Jantharl was somewhere dark and deep and confused. As he drifted on downward, the void around him was enlivened by occasional faint booms and crashes and gabbling voices.

Deeper still.

Somewhere nearby, he was dimly aware, he could hear drunken singing. Human males, none of them prospective bards. Or even minstrels. He hoped.

The singing swam louder and nearer, until he recognized it.

The warriors of Impiltur were whooping it up.

In the street below. Outside the windows of the best club in Thaelfortress.

He recognized its magnificent vaulted wooden ceiling. Off to his left was the *clink* of cutlery and crystal tallglasses ringing as they were gently struck together in toasts. And people—not many—laughed and chattered. Friends. *His* friends.

He turned his head and beheld a glittering table of candlelit decanters and domed platters. Floonq, Tammaszar, Melgora, and Oparlra were all enjoying what looked like a marvelous—and very expensive—feast.

They espied him and were on their feet in a happy roar of greeting. Oparlra and Melgora rushed over to him.

He lay on a cot, he realized at about the same time they stopped crying his name and "You're awake!" and started smothering him with kisses.

"Bards!" Floonq said disgustedly, from the far side of a nigh-empty tallglass almost as big as it was. "What is it about bards? Lovelies don't rush over to smother *me* with kisses, no matter what I do!"

"It's his surprising journey," Tamm replied, downing half a decanter of firewine in one long gulp. "The ladies can never resist a surprising journey."

"Remind me to become a bard," the urhult replied.

"Become a bard," Jantharl told him solemnly, the moment his lips were free to speak and breathe. "And save the Realms. Again."

About the Author

Ed Greenwood created the Forgotten Realms® setting, and he's still the prime mover in making it go. His neighbors sometimes hear him walking in the woods, shouting, "Go, Realms, go!"

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

ED GREENWOOD'S
Eye on the Realms

The Six Horned Crowns

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Wayne England

A room of an inn in Waterdeep has recently become haunted, afflicted with magical strangeness, or targeted by a macabre prank. On six nights during which the room was not rented, ancient crowns appeared on its lone table. Each crown is a rough circlet of gold set with large, valuable gems, having two high points resembling horns. Each also contains a head—or rather, the skull of a long-dead orc.

The phenomenon was interrupted briefly after a guard was set on the room, but it resumed again after that watch ended. After the arrival of each crown, the room was sealed—but a tenday has passed since the sixth one, and no more have arrived since. Now, though, the six known crowns have begun to teleport around the Sword Coast and to other locales across the Realms. Wherever they appear, people die or vanish . . . and strange, old items turn up.

Where did these crowns come from, where are they going now, and why? What happened to the people who vanished or died? What is the source of the old items left behind?

Mrayvrens' Bountiful Rest

In 1462 DR, the Waterdhavian merchant Haeldrar Mrayvren retired from active foundry work, letting his four sons carry on the business of Mrayvren's Superior Castings.[1] "Flush with high-heaped coins,"[2] Mrayvren determined to fulfill the lifelong dream of his wife, Elmra, to own and operate her own inn in the city. This establishment would not merely offer accommodations, but also serve as a real haven for travelers—"all that an inn *should* be," in the words of Elmra Mrayvren.

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So was born Mrayvrens' Bountiful Rest. This magnificently renovated former mansion (plus adjoining buildings) stands on the east side of Ilzantul Street in North Ward, four doors down from Delzorin Street.[3] The Bountiful (as city folk have taken to calling it) features ornately plastered ceilings, gleaming expanses of white marble, tall pillars, and many-branched wall candelabras.

The Mrayvrens strove for relaxed luxury without the hauteur of most high-priced inns. The Bountiful is known for its discreet, attentive staff, with a firm policy of serving hot meals in the privacy of guests' rooms rather than providing a common dining hall. The inn ensures more true rest than many in the city—it hosts no revels or feasts, and it stages no entertainment, offering a blissful quiet that patrons value above all else.

The heart of the Bountiful is centuries old, built as the city home of Lord Urlymen Jardeth. A discontented bachelor, he had become estranged from the rest of his family over his wild spending and what they termed his dissolute ways. (In turn, he derided his kin as "cold-hearted misers who value coins above life and cannot see the difference between austerity and squalor, nor between servants and slaves.") The mansion has had many owners, including a brief stint, from 1424 through 1429 DR, as the headquarters of the Guild of Apothecaries & Physicians. Over that time it acquired no reputation for being haunted or as the site of anything sinister or even of passing interest.[4] Nor did it gain any such notoriety as an inn. One elderly guest died in his room of natural causes, without any controversy, and thus far does not seem inclined to haunt the place of his death.

Crowns Where Never Crowns Before

About a month ago, strange occurrences began in one lodging on the inn's fifth floor, known as the Gryphonshar. This long suite is reached by a narrow, curved passage from the floor's shared hall. The area is spacious, furnished with a curtained four-poster bed and a table with two chairs, and opens onto a balcony with a windowed door. At the time of the events, the room was empty and locked.

Each evening, the Bountiful's staff opens and inspects unrented rooms to make sure no windows have been broken by bird strikes or other mishaps (vandalism is rare in North Ward). One night, between two such evenings' inspections, an orc skull appeared—apparently out of thin air—in the middle of the unoccupied Gryphonshar's table, facing the balcony. The skull was crowned with a gold headband of antique style, irregularly set with large, mismatched gems and with thin spires, resembling horns, projecting from the band above each temple.

The finder was a trusted chambermaid. Without touching the skull, she relocked the door and went straight to the Mrayvrens. After examining the area, they bundled the skull and crown in a bedspread and carried them out of the room, storing them in a double-locked strongroom in the cellar. The door to the Gryphonshar was locked, and the keyhole covered with a stamped wax seal to show evidence of tampering. All agreed to keep the matter quiet so as to protect the reputation of the inn.

Haeldrar Mrayvren arranged with two other staff members to walk watch on the fifth floor that night, around the Gryphonshar in particular, without telling them anything about the skull. They saw and heard nothing unusual. In the morning, both the Mrayvrens returned to the room to find the seal intact, with no further strange appearances. They relocked the room without sealing it. Another check just after highsun revealed nothing untoward, as did the evening inspection later that day; the room was again sealed as before. Yet the next morning, though both lock and seal were intact, another crowned skull rested on the table.

This time the master of the house locked the room, without removing the skull, and sent the maid who had discovered it to summon a member of the Watchful Order of Magists & Protectors. She was unable to convince the duty magist to accompany her back to the inn, so Haeldrar placed the second skull and crown in a different strongroom, locking and sealing the Gryphonshar as before. He let the matter lie until the next night, being busy with other duties.

Outside Help

In the morning, as before, the lock and seal were intact, but yet another orc skull sat on the room's table. Haeldrar paid a personal visit to the Watch, displayed the three skulls, and complained about the guild's refusal to investigate the matter. The Watch officer, just as irked by the Watchful Order's unresponsiveness, accompanied him to the guildhall and persuaded the magists to take action. The order agreed to send two apprentices to investigate the room and stand vigil in it that night.

Nothing at all happened.

The order magists cast numerous spells in the room, trying to find any traces of earlier magic, a hidden portal, a secret passage or panel . . . and found no trace of anything. Loath to waste another night, they departed and told Mrayvren to call them the moment anything more occurred.

Of course, a fourth skull showed up the night after that, in the locked and sealed room. An order magist duly came, examined the skull, found no sign of a portal, and went away frowning.

Exasperated, Haeldrar visited a few taverns and hired an adventurer-wizard (Thurdrem Clamtrael, of Baldur's Gate) to sit up the next night in the

Gryphonshar. The wizard locked himself in, enjoyed a good meal and better wine at Mrayvren's expense—and was found the next morning drooling in a chair by the table upon which rested a fifth crowned skull. He had been the victim of a *feeblemind* effect, according to the alarmed magist who attended to the scene.

Now Elmra Mrayvren, fearing that "one of *our* minds will be addled next," prevailed on her husband to call in Waterdeep's foremost investigator-for-hire, Awntrus "Black Glove" Malaver. The famous detective had a prior commitment that night, so the Gryphonshar was relocked and resealed but left unguarded. A sixth skull duly appeared.

When Malaver arrived the next day, he prowled about the room, examined all the skulls, and concluded that their arrival was the result of some sort of portal or repeated *teleport* spells. He told the proprietors to leave the room locked and sealed while he investigated further—and to pay his first day's fee to the maid who had discovered the first skull (to ensure her continued silence). Malaver asked for a list of everyone who'd rented that room over the last season up to immediately before the first skull's appearance, and suggested that the Mrayvrens hand over the skulls to the Watch for safekeeping in the meantime. First, though, he asked leave to bring someone ("riding his own coin"[5]) to examine the crowns. He called in a jeweler[6] who owed him a favor and received a detailed description and appraisal[7].

Strange Twists

After being turned over to the Watch, the six crowns were secured together in a dungeon in Castle Waterdeep.[8] They did not remain there long. Despite the many-layered wards about the castle[9], all six crowns vanished the next night. It soon became apparent that they had teleported to six separate locations up and down the Sword Coast (including a kitchen window in a Silverymoon bakery, a tomb in Mintarn, and a nameless trailmoot in the heart of the Wealdath). Each remained only briefly, then teleported elsewhere again and again.

Wherever a crown appeared, it was said, people died or disappeared, and there were reports of old, random items left in their place (including a stone orc axe, a nondescript dagger, and maps of neighborhoods or sewers in Shining Sea ports).

The Watch summoned senior members of the Watchful Order to urgent council. They in turn demanded that the Watch locate Malaver and compel him to tell all he knew. An "all-horns hunt"[10] for him went out forthwith.

Malaver, in the meantime, had hired a colleague, the independent adventurer-wizard Jessalythe Sparrantar, to consult on the case. On being summoned to the council at Castle Waterdeep, he brought her along to share what she had learned thus far.

Mystery Solved?

In the list of renters Malaver had obtained, Sparrantar recognized the names of three adventurers who either were wizards or were connected to wizards. Moreover, she spotted an alias of the wizard Glaerus "the Black" Blalakhmar—who she knew was exploring wild, orc-haunted vales in the Sword Coast North. Sparrantar reasoned that the wizard had worked his mark into varnish or stain freshly applied to the table (or the floor under it) in the room, either by the inn staff or by himself over their existing work, so he could use the Gryphonshar as a teleport destination for treasures from the orc holds. The discovery at the Bountiful Rest might be the result of something untoward happening to Blalakhmar's apprentice Tyrael Dantathur. Most likely that man was supposed to rent the room, quietly receive the skulls, hide them in his luggage, and remove them elsewhere with no one in Waterdeep being any the wiser.

Further, Blalakhmar must also have applied his mark to each crown (using something personal such as blood or spittle), so he could later work more elaborate magic to safely translocate all of them to other destinations. At those new spots, defensive wards prepared earlier would guard the crowns against tampering, which could explain the reported disappearances and deaths. If anyone touched a warded crown without speaking the correct words, it would be whisked elsewhere, while the handler traveled to yet another spot. At the same time, junk items assembled earlier by Blalakhmar would be transported from wherever the handler went, to tell the wizard or his agent which trap had been set off. If someone instead attempted to use magic to bypass the wards, a violent backlash would be triggered, likely killing the meddler.

"The crowns," Sparrantar asserted, "are now assembled wherever Blalakhmar keeps his treasures. Those who had the misfortune to find and touch them have been scattered into whatever nasty surprises he desired to visit on those who interfered with 'his' things. Blalakhmar must still be somewhere in the mountain vales north of Sundabar, looking for more treasures. I suggest the Watchful Order rent and keep watch in the Gryphonshar until he can be found; if he turns up anything really interesting, it will be worth breaking his magical hold over such an item."

When Sparrantar had finished speaking, the most senior Watchful Order magist frowningly asserted that her trail of conjecture was far too long, and he refused to act on her suggestion. At this point the private council was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Elminster Aumar, the Sage of Shadowdale. He firmly supported Sparrantar's deduction that the appearance of the crowned skulls was the work of Blalakhmar, insisting that the order would do well to heed and obey her. He added, "There is more to this than the treachery of an apprentice, or Blalakhmar pilfering crowns from orc tombs. Had I more time, I'd attend to this myself. Suffice it to say that the order would do well to find Blalakhmar. Not merely

his safety, but that of Waterdeep itself, could well be at stake."

Elminster's refusal to say more angered the council, as did the obvious fact that he had been eavesdropping on their proceedings. He calmly admitted to the latter—before departing with Sparrantar and Malaver to "conduct some unrelated private business with these two bright, capable, *useful* persons." The two junior Watchful Order magists earlier ordered to look into the matter promptly vanished from the room at the Rest, and neither has been seen since.

Notes

1. Haeldrar Mrayvren founded Mrayvren's Superior Castings and built it into a wealthy success by providing Faerûn with ornate metal castings for myriad everyday uses, such as ventilation grilles or stair rails. These utilitarian items range from the merely good-looking to the breathtakingly beautiful.

2. As the Sword Coast saying goes. "Flush with high-heaped coins" literally means wealthy or having excess funds, but the expression is never used in that sense. Rather, it describes a person, a family, a group, or a guild or trading company eager to invest or to buy in bulk, almost always to start a new endeavor or expand into holdings "not previously entertained" (to use the most formal Waterdhavian turn of commercial phrase).

3. The inn consists of four linked buildings, two of them fronting on Ilzantul Street, that form the south side of the alley entering that city block from Ilzantul. (The stables occupy the irregularly shaped building fronting on Vhezoar Street, also on the south side of that alley, east of the Bountiful Rest.) The Bountiful has entrances and exits in all its exterior walls, and its two main buildings soar six floors above street level.

4. In the words of Meurold Navarnaekur, the self-styled Sage of Waterdeep, who was an expert on the history of various buildings and building sites around the city. Navarnaekur was regarded as the authority on city history from the period spanning the 1430s DR until his death in 1451 DR (being then in his ninety-sixth year). Tragically for other scholars, most of his notes and records were stolen while he lay on his deathbed. They were widely rumored to hold clues regarding hiding places within the city of many lost treasures and the wealth of now-deceased citizens.

5. This expression of the Sword Coast and Heartlands means "at one's own expense." So, "riding my own coin" (or coins) means "at my expense" or "I'll pay for this round." "It's on the house" is appropriate only if the speaker is the proprietor.

6. The aging guildsman Thanthrabbas Ohmtalakar, an unprepossessing man of impeccable reputation. His family is of Calishite blood but claims two generations of Waterdhavian heritage. Ohmtalakar's Fine Gems, a Sea Ward firm, was founded by Thanthrabbas's mother, Malaerha. (Both of his parents are now dead, and his daughters run the business with him.) The shop is located on the second floor of the first west-side Sul Street building north of Chanszobur's Manywares. (That glittering and highly regarded store, a favorite of many nobles, stocking expensive but superior merchandise of all sorts, occupies the northwestern corner of the intersection of Sul and Vondil Streets.)

7. "I am no expert on orcs, but the skulls come from those neither recently alive nor long dead—say, a decade to three decades old. They belonged to mature individuals of similar bloodlines; if not directly related, then from the same tribe or tribal region. I know nothing of orc kings or the meaning of crowns such as these.

"All the crowns are handmade by several different workers, crudely fashioned of gold poured over an iron base. The gold coating will soon separate and flake off, being bonded only by cauldron-blood (probably from fallen foes). Gems of a wide variety were pressed into the still-warm gold, and the heat of that contact has both diminished their hues and bonded them poorly; over time, even with careful handling, they will fall out. Some gems must have been found—they are uncut, inexpertly and partially polished—while others were perhaps won in battle, being faceted and showing the marks of earlier mountings.

"Every crown contains perhaps 400 gp worth of gold at most. Each bears eight to twelve large and eye-catching gems, varying in worth from about 60 gp to about 3,000 gp each. Two crowns I value at just 900 gp apiece: one is worth 1,250 or so; another would command about 1,675 gp. Two are of great value, one appraised at 6,770 gp and the other at 9,900 gp. These valuations are based on the crowns' present condition; all of them will deteriorate over time as the gold flakes and gems fall free."

8. Turning suspect items over to the Watch ("safegiving") has become customary among careful citizens of the city over the last thirty years or so. Doing this is standard procedure when a valuable item becomes dangerous to possess or its ownership is disputed, or if it has been deemed a "fell treasure" that might have a magical curse or a link to undead. Safeguarding such goods thus becomes a civic responsibility and absolves the owner or possessor of any liability regarding them. If a treasure goes unclaimed for four seasons, or a dispute over its ownership is resolved, it is returned to the owner who safegave it. Less scrupulous owners leave their valuables with the castle until needed, whether to appear poor or to avoid the expense of safeguarding them. (Some guilds also

guard items for members; they enjoy a better record than the castle for secrecy, but a poorer one for security.)

9. These wards are admittedly so old, and so many-layered, that no one alive today knows even a tenth of their "keyholes" (crafted ways through)—let alone all the gaps resulting from deterioration, not-entirely-repaired magical attacks, or unintended combinations of thousands of different wardcastings. Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun once described the castle and palace wards as "riddled like shipwood so worm-eaten that it looks like lace and crumbles at a firm touch." That was long ago; the wards have grown worse since.

10. The Waterdhavian Watch equivalent of our real-world APB or "calling all cars." The term refers to the signal horns carried by Watch officers on patrol.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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DARK·SUN CAMPAIGN SETTING

Eye on Dark Sun

The Crown of Whispers

By Rodney Thompson

Illustration by Kieran Yanner

Through the strength of his magic and the convictions of his paranoia, the sorcerer-king of Eldaarich known as Daskinor rules over a secluded, protected city in the distant north. The mad king was not always quite so mad, and at one time he was more akin to the other sorcerer-kings in the rationality of his rule. But then the strength of his mind began to turn against him, and Daskinor became ever more driven by his own suspicions and fears. He was also unparalleled in his mastery of psionics, and his mind exuded psychic energy that his paranoia tainted.

The simple circlet that Daskinor wore as a crown was much less elaborate than the trappings of other sorcerer-kings. What sets it apart is the rare silvery metal from which it's made. Originally crafted with minor enchantments, the crown also had the ability to absorb the brunt of the psychic energy that Daskinor's mind was emitting. Over time, the circlet transformed into an artifact in its own right, imbued with all the sorcerer-king's paranoia and a healthy dose of psionic power.

One day, after Daskinor had crossed the line into full-blown insanity, the circlet was wrenched from his brow by his most loyal templar, who was convinced that removing it would cure the king. The templar was wrong, but before Daskinor could have the templar captured and executed, the circlet was transported beyond the city walls and swept up in a sandstorm. The crown was thought to be lost forever, and it soon passed out of the memory of any who knew of it.

As happens with some artifacts, the circlet did not stay lost for long. Daskinor's circlet, called by most the *Crown of Whispers*, has found its way back into the world, traveling from one owner to the next in its quest to return to Eldaarich and reunite with its former master.

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Crown of Whispers Paragon Level

The lost crown of the mad king Daskinor of Eldaarich is a simple metal circlet that wraps tightly around the brow of its wearer.

Artifact: Head slot item

Properties

- ✦ You are immune to the dominated condition.
- ✦ Whenever a creature deals psychic damage to you with an attack, you can deal that creature an equal amount of psychic damage as a free action.
- ✦ You roll twice on Perception checks and take either result.

Utility Power (Psionic) ✦ **Daily** (Minor Action)

Effect: Ranged 20 (one creature). Make an Insight check against the moderate DC for the target's level. On a success, you can sense the target's thoughts and understand the target's motivations and intentions until the end of the encounter.

Roleplaying the Crown of Whispers

The *Crown of Whispers* is a psionic force that embodies the traits of insidious paranoia and manipulation, and it has a desire to be reunited with Daskinor. At first, it provides nothing but benefits to its owner. Once the crown has worked its way into the mind of its host and made the host dependent on its abilities, the crown begins nudging its owner toward the city-state of Eldaarich. This drive manifests in the form of enticement (offering greater rewards for doing as the crown wants) and punishment (denying something essential to the owner until the *Crown of Whispers* gets what it wants).

The primary way the crown communicates with its owner is through a chorus of whispering voices that only the wearer can hear. When the crown is first placed upon the wearer's head, these whispers are muted, manifesting only as the brief sound of a wind blowing across a sand dune. As time passes, the crown grows bolder and more skilled at communication with its current wearer, and the whispers grow louder and clearer. After a prolonged period of use by one wearer, the whispers manifested by the artifact form a synchronous chorus that acts as an invisible advisor to that individual, as if a vizier stood just at the shoulder of the wearer.

Goals of the Crown

The *Crown of Whispers* is a part of Daskinor's own mind, but it was separated and given its independence long ago. Independence means nothing to the crown, though. Instead, it craves the relationship it once had with its first owner. As a result, the *Crown of Whispers* is possessed of a singular purpose: to become inexorably intertwined with the psyche of Daskinor once more.

Though the crown was formed with the aid of the mind of the sorcerer-king of Eldaarich, only will drives it, not true intelligence. The crown acts using manipulation tactics that its original owner used to great effect and does not possess any logical, reasoning sentience to form new tactics of its own. As it gains familiarity with its current wearer, its knowledge of the wearer's thoughts allows it to prey upon the wearer's fears and more effectively manipulate its current owner. Its goals are as follows.

- ✦ To return to Eldaarich and rest upon the brow of the mad king Daskinor.
- ✦ To be worn by individuals whom it can manipulate into moving it closer to its destination.
- ✦ To protect itself from dangers, both real and imaginary, by making its owners as "vigilant" as Daskinor.

Concordance

The concordance of the *Crown of Whispers* represents how well the crown believes that the owner is serving it in leading it back to Eldaarich and Daskinor. As the owner brings the crown closer to its goal, the artifact grows more pleased. Such pleasure is expressed not only by further reward, but also by the growing activity of the crown in the mind of its host. As the concordance increases, so too does the clarity of the whispers in the mind of the host. The crown begins offering advice that sounds like wisdom but slowly turns the wearer more paranoid. Any attempt to thwart the crown's goals displeases it, and its whispers in the mind of its host crescendo into a maddening cacophony.

Starting score	**5**
Owner gains a level	**+1d10**
Owner has training in Perception	**+2**
Owner has been to Eldaarich	**+2**
Owner kills an agent of a sorcerer-king other than Daskinor (maximum 1/encounter)	**+1**
Owner spies on an ally (maximum 1/day)	**+1**
Owner preemptively attacks an ally	**+1**
Owner attempts to remove the crown	**-2**
Owner performs a significant act for an ally that builds trust between them	**-2**

Pleased (16–20)

"I am the Crown of Whispers. *You will speak to me now."*

The crown is so pleased with the user that it has subsumed much of the wearer's identity. Its whispers, inescapable and clear, drill deeply into the mind of the wearer, and the crown becomes a part of the owner's psyche.

The wearer gains access to the crown's attack power while the item remains at this concordance.

Attack Power (Psionic, Psychic) ✦ **Daily** (Standard Action)
Attack: Close burst 5 (enemies in the burst); Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma +4 vs. Will
Hit: 4d12 + your Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma modifier psychic damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: At the start of the target's next turn, it must choose either to attack one of its allies or to take the damage it took from this attack again.

Satisfied (12–15)

"You stay back! The crown is mine!"

The owner has made enough progress toward the crown's goals that the crown believes the wearer is still worthy of keeping it. The crown demands that its owner keep it safe, and as an incentive, it protects the wearer from psychic assaults.

The wearer gains access to the following property while the item remains at this concordance or higher.

Property
After you take psychic damage, you gain temporary hit points equal to the amount of psychic damage you took.

Normal (5–11)

"Enemies are everywhere. I can feel their eyes upon me. Why are you looking at me like that?"

The crown is evaluating the owner at this point, determining whether the wearer is worthy. The crown's whispers are insidious, and they slowly plant suspicions and fears into the wearer's mind.

At this concordance, the crown has the characteristics included in its basic description.

Unsatisfied (1–4)

"You say I'm just jumping at shadows, but sometimes it's good to be afraid of the dark."

The crown's consciousness recedes during the owner's waking hours, refusing to provide the owner with aid or advice. When the owner attempts to sleep, though, the crown invades the host's mind, planting subconscious suggestions and twisting the owner's dreams to frighten him or her into compliance.

While the crown remains at this concordance or lower, the wearer loses access to the crown's utility power and psychic damage property, and the crown gains the following property.

Property
When you take an extended rest, you regain only a number of healing surges equal to half your maximum healing surges.

Angered (0 or lower)

"Can't someone stop the whispers? I haven't slept in days."

An angered crown does its best to get its owner killed, hoping to pass on to a new host. The whispers that might have been more muted when the crown was unsatisfied return in force, but instead of clear words, the whispers become paranoid ramblings and screeches of disgust. The angered crown refuses to let its owner sleep or meditate, attempting to exhaust the wearer so the dangers of Athas can end the host's ownership of the artifact.

While the crown remains at this concordance, the wearer loses access to the item's domination immunity property, and the crown gains the following properties.

Properties
✦ When you take an extended rest, you regain only one healing surge.
✦ You take a –2 penalty to all defenses.

Moving On

"Get this thing off me!"

The *Crown of Whispers* constantly wants to move closer to Eldaarich and, by extension, Daskinor. When its owner is taking it farther away from that city-state, the artifact might decide to move on. When it does so, the crown tries to get the host killed. Although the simplest solution might be to get the owner to remove it and pass off the artifact to someone else, the inherent madness of Daskinor within the crown prefers vengeance and death. Furthermore, previous owners of the crown could potentially warn future owners away from donning the artifact, and it wants to make sure that future owners are as susceptible as possible to its manipulation.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an advanced designer for Dungeons & Dragons® R&D at Wizards of the Coast, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. His credits for the Dungeons & Dragons game include the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting* and the *Dark Sun Creature Catalog™*, *Monster Vault™*, *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild™*, and *Lords of Waterdeep™*.

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